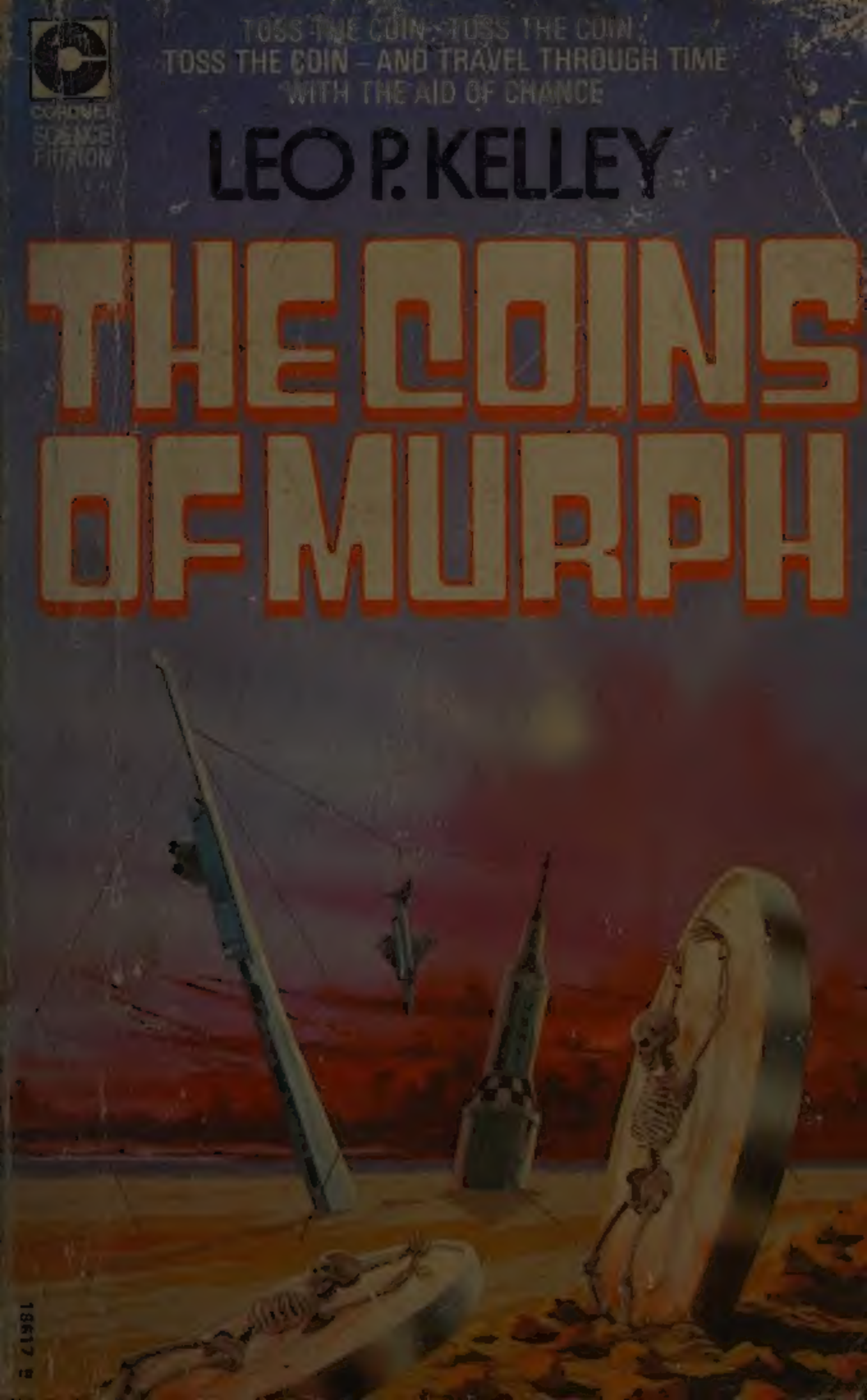
TOSS THE COIN - TOSS THE COIN -
TOSS THE COIN – AND TRAVEL THROUGH TIME
WITH THE AID OF CHANCE
LEO P. KELLEY
THE COINS OF MURPH

24

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". . . had a little lamb, little lamb. . . ."
"The square root of .9990876 is. . . ."
". . . extra X chromosome leads to. . . ."
"The Greatest Show on Earth."
Berg mused momentarily over the tapes and then looked up at his Coiners. "With what you have learned so far, one of you tell me which is the correct decision based on the feedback from Murph?"
"Lank?" Berg prompted.
"I have seen the moon hanging in the trees at the top of High Hill. I have seen the stars dance among the branches – first here, then there. I found it beautiful. The Greatest Show on Earth. The Survive should climb to the top of High Hill."
Berg threw out his hands and turned swiftly, making obeisance in the direction of Murph. "Well done Lank. You have eyes for seeing and a heart that leaps to truth's music. May Murph bless you."
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Also by the same author,
and available in Coronet Books:

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The Earth Tripper
The Man from Maybe

The Coins of Murph

Leo P. Kelley

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THE COINS OF MURPH

CHAPTER ONE

It had been Afterit for all of Lank's twenty years and for uncounted years before he emerged wailing on the atom-raped surface of the earth. Now, as he made his way through the network of upright spears that had been living trees Beforeit, night caressed him with her veloured paws and he thrilled to her touch, unable to suppress the exquisite sense of pleasure flooding through him even though he knew that in less than a week he would have to participate in another Toss.

He splashed through a shallow stream and shook himself vigorously when he reached the other side. Water flew from his long-haired head and from the soft bark girdle he wore around his loins. Safely tucked inside his left cheek, his Coin clicked against his teeth.

The urge to stretch seized him. He spat out his Coin, clawed it from the dirt and expertly tossed it.

Heads, I stretch, he thought.

Tails.

Lank cursed. "May Murph maul me!"

Resignedly, he replaced his Coin in the fleshy pouch of his cheek, the dirt on it grinding granular between his teeth. He hurried on.

Tails!

Up ahead of Lank, riding high on the hill, was the new moon. It reminded him of the season – Full Light – and of who he was and who he was becoming. Lank, the Coiner. Lank, vessel of Murph's wisdom. Lank, prince of punched tape and probabilities.

The thoughts stirred noises within him – iron butterflies flew in his stomach, the winds of change and chance blew in his ears.

When he reached the top of the hill, he discovered that the moon had fled far into the sky. Down he went and past the skeletal ruins of Randland, fear sweating his nearly naked hide, and on through the countryside that was strewn with Beforeit things. Melted automobiles. Smashed steeples.

He paused at the Place of Pits, his nostrils quivering, his eyes slitted, his legs taut. He had heard a sound. His tongue swirled in his mouth, pushing his Coin between his teeth and closed lips. He waited, poised for flight or fight, watching.

She climbed up out of one of the Pits and began to hurry off into the distance, the thick ashes swirling about her ankles, dead and desolate, to chronicle her passing.

Lank spat.

His Coin hit his waiting hand, dizzied up, down. *Heads to kill, tails to take.* His Coin stared up at him, a silver eye in the ashes. *Tails!*

Lank sprang forward until he formed a cunning barrier in front of the girl. He turned around twice, muttering seductively, weaving his head from side to side. She did not Toss her Coin and it wondered him. Instead, she swerved swiftly and began to run away from him.

He ran after her, pawing the dirt to dust, turning, turning. She paid no attention to his courting. He pounced upon her and the blind craters of the Place of Pits were the only witness to their encounter.

The girl moaned beneath him as he penetrated her and her sharp teeth pierced his shoulder twice, amusing him. Minutes later, the no-longer-lunging Lank withdrew from the girl and sprawled, bellying down on the hard ground, his heart hammering. He touched a finger to the torn flesh of his shoulder that had been wounded by the girl's teeth, wet it, touched his wound again. The taste of his own blood sat salty on his tongue.

He pretended not to see her slide towards him but as her arm rose up, he rolled out of reach. Her arm came down

and the piece of Beforeit glass that she had used as a weapon sliced into the earth. *Coca*, it said whitely.

And then fear filled Lank. Not fear born of the possibility of his own spilled blood but an even darker fear. The girl, he realized, had not Tossed before she struck! He was certain of it! He had been watching her carefully all the time.

"Coin," he snarled, a damning.

Her head rose inches above the dirt. Her tongue flicked out between the gates of her lips and with it a word. "Kill," she said.

"You did not Toss," he accused. He began to fear this girl even more than he feared the deadly ruins of Randland. She was young – as young as he was. She was strong and muscular but there was a feminine aura of softness emanating from her.

She reached – a movement like the flick of a little whip – for her weapon Lank brought his fist down hard upon her hand. The fragment of glass remained imbedded impotent in the earth.

"You *decided*!" he growled.

She threw back her long black hair as if to hide herself in it. "Not the first time. Not the last."

Lank flung her weapon into the nearest Pit. He felt defiled. The girl had decided, Coinlessly, to kill him.

As she rose and ran around the rim of the Pit, Lank watched her go, wishing that his own Coin had come up Heads earlier. Then he could have killed her. Now she was gone. And he was sick with loathing. He had heard it whispered, heard that there were moments of madness that sometimes came upon one when action did not follow a Toss but was taken by choice. He shook his head in dismay and thanked Murph that now was not Beforeit. But the thought nagged him. Could the old and evil ways from Beforeit return? The thought brought fear and, in fear's wake, rage. He hoped the girl would lose the next Toss.

Eisen, an underfed eagle of a man, moved about Murph, speaking the familiar ritualized words in his gaunt and ragged voice, touching the altar of Murph – the altar that *was* Murph – and Eisen's only hope and every dark dream.

"Set minus frame. Negative input, glory be. In the beginning, the end. Two decimals to T minus thirteen. As it was Beforeit, is not now and never ever again so shall be. Hail the five points of the stone star. Praise Pentagons!"

He singsonged the words that were easy on his tongue with long use and spanked his sides with the featherless wings of his hands in a steady, down-time rhythm. The room around him was scrubbed and spotless. Steel walls gleamed. Luminated plastic tubes pulsed with fluids. Little lights – yellow and blue, red and green like the ghosts of Christmas vanished – flickered or glowed with no variation in intensity. Eisen sighed and ran his arthritic fingers along the metal sides of Murph.

"In the stone star, be all my sins recorded. I am Eisen, the accursed and bearer of the burden of blood guilt. On my forehead have I tattooed the label of my iniquity – U238. The Child of Man, I suffer the sins of my fathers and serve Murph in repentance and the ways that are requisite because of Beforeit."

"Eisen." The new voice in the room was sibilant and soft; it sidled into the room through rotten teeth and thick lips and it held no hint of concern in it. "Eisen, it is I."

Eisen turned and focused his eyes on the man who had spoken. "Brother Berg, I greet you and wish that you may dwell everlastingly serene in the Mind of Murph."

Berg gestured impatiently. "There's no one here. You needn't –"

"I must. Murph –"

"Dear brother and credulous soul," Berg whispered, his tone snide, his eyes glittering. "Murph cares nothing for your homilies. And there is no once else about to hear your reverence."

Eisen shook his head. He frowned. "It is better to be safe

than sorry. He may be –"

"*It* may be, Eisen. *It!*"

"But it speaks. It began somewhere during the early days of Afterit. It had a cause. It is *the* Cause."

Berg sat down on a lopsided crate in the centre of the room, his ragged robe fluttering about his feet, tiny insects tumbling to the floor from its folds. "To business brother. The new crop of Coiners has come and awaits us." He rubbed his stubbled chin and smiled with delight. "And afterward, there are the women."

Ignoring his brother's last remark, Eisen addressed himself to the first item Berg had mentioned. "They are believers?"

"I personally screened and selected each one of them. All healthy males and eager to atone. Their apprenticeship, as is the custom, is for a lunar year and when it is finished, they will move out among the people with their orthodoxy as much a part of them as the balls swinging between their legs. With the first, they will proselytize and with the second, fertilize the flesh of devout females as they instruct them in the pious messages of Murph." Berg roared with laughter at his own cynicism and the shock he saw swimming in his brother's eyes.

"You blaspheme!" Eisen wailed.

"I tell the truth," Berg retorted.

"You add measure to measure of the blood guilt that weighs so heavily upon both of us," Eisen muttered. "You are truly of the line that leads down through all the lost generations to the moment when Beforeit became Afterit as a result of the deeds of that dark one, our ancestor."

"Eisenberg."

"We share his name, you and I, Berg, but little else."

"True. We Tossed and each of us took a piece of his name as our ancestors have done for ages. You, Eisen. Me, Berg."

"As our Coins decreed."

"So be it. But enough for now. Come, brother. Rouse

your old bones and put down your foolish fancies and let us go out to welcome the new Coiners. Wear your reverence upon your sleeve where each of them may see it and be subdued. I shall speak no more blasphemies. My mutterings are for your ears only and of no import elsewhere."

Berg moved away from his brother and out into the anteroom of the computer complex, followed by Eisen whose head drooped and whose trembling fingers danced a digital pavanne, getting in each other's way and making each other tremble all the more.

"Coiners!" Berg was intoning to the assembled young men when Eisen caught up with him. "Murph welcomes you. He awaits you. Fear not and be glad for there are no spikes in Murph. Pure power is he, stored in the sun that never dies."

"Cadmium," came the collective response from the men

"Nickel," added Lank as loudly as he dared, wondering if the nickel in the batteries that sustained Murph was the same material that composed his Coin which bore the beast and the feathered man on its two faces.

"Name me your names," ordered Berg.

"Peter."

"Kennedy, the Half."

"Jersey."

"Lank of the Tribe of Five."

"Lincoln of the Copper Clan."

When they had all identified themselves, Berg raised his hands to the men. "There are twelve of you. One lunar year, while the Coin of the moon grows big with light twelve times, will you serve the majesty of Murph the Mighty. Eisen, speak to the Coiners. Men, I give you my brother, Eisen, bearer with me of the blood guilt of our ancestor Eisenberg who conceived in his heart the evil of Afterit and who brought it into being."

Eisen shuffled forward and took his place beside his brother in front of the assembled men. "Murph is mighty in his teaching. His tongue is the sword of our deliverance.

You, there. Your name?"

"Kennedy the Half," the beardless boy answered.

"Would you kill for Murph, kill any questioner?"

The boy's chest heaved as he shouted. "Yes!"

Eisen lowered his eyes and then raised them. "You have failed the Test, Kennedy the Half. You chose; you did not Toss. You are cast out into darkness, Murphless. Go!"

Lank shuddered. Kennedy had given his answer without consultation with his Coin. Obviously, there was no place in Coindom for such a one. Lank remembered the girl with whom he had lain only hours ago. Like her, Kennedy was doomed.

"Decoin Kennedy the Half!" roared Berg, after Tossing to determine the stripling's fate.

Attendants wearing ropes of silver coins around their necks sprang into the room. Berg pointed at the frightened boy. The attendants, without a word, seized him and dragged him from the anteroom. He cried out his regrets and his promises to Toss always, everywhere – but it did him no good.

Berg and Eisen moved out into the courtyard that was littered with debris. The remaining eleven candidates for Coindom followed them out and stood silent as the brawny attendants, accompanied by the tinkling sound of the coins that hung in garlands from their necks and circled their kneecaps, tied the hapless boy to a huge, rough-hewn and solid circle of wood. Spread-eagled against the symbolic Coin, the boy stared wildly out at the watchers, his mouth working but unable to emit a word. It had been stuffed with soil by the thorough attendants.

A moment later, the attendants slowly rolled the wooden disk up High Hill until they became invisible in the darkness, they and their victim.

All below waited in silence until the moon crept out to watch from a cove of clouds. Then, at that white moment, the attendants released the disk and it rumbled its way down the hill, veered sharply to the right as it struck an

outcropping of rock, and went careering over the lip of a deep chasm that gaped several hundred feet to the north of the computer complex.

Berg said, "To Coin or not to Coin is not the question. One must ever Coin. Such is the commandment of Murph. [illegible]"

The men followed him back inside the complex.

When they were seated on the floor and the shadowy women, nude and silent, had brought them fruit to eat and water to drink, they waited before Murph.

An hour passed. Then, with no warning, Murph spoke. He sighed. He sang. He instructed and swore in a manner befitting a god.

"*As it was Beforeit, is not now and never shall be again! Seek out the secrets in the five points of the pentagonal stone star. Listen, my children, and you shall hear of the mad, mad choice of Prexy Lear.*

"*You Survives – you bastards in your mangy hides smelling like dead dogs that have lain too long in the sun – you listen, my children of the limp and skittish looks – and Murph shall tell you – tales. Tales to cozy up to when the wild dogs scent you on the plain and come baying. Tales to take with you to your musty and mildewed hidey places in the canyons after you've hunted and found a rat or two. Gnaw on the raw rodent's bones and rub sticks into fire and tell to one another the tales that Murph has allotted you. Tales of Beforeit. Tall tales and all, all too true.*

"*Murph's first commandment: Do nothing Coinless. Decide nothing. Die first. Live Coined.*

"*Oh, I remember what a pretty place old Ireland was Beforeit. Full of fat and juicy clerics and nuns with hard knuckles to use on catechists. Would that I had never left its green hills and shining lakes to come here to this deadland of opportunity. But enough prattling. On to matters of moment. I am not a jealous god but I damn well am a determined one, you can bet your asses, me boyos. Beforeit is over – ended! You hear? Ended. Now I've given you*

Afterit. Coins and all. Use them in good health or I'll break every goddamned bone in your bodies, you hear me!"

Lank, in the days that followed, learned. He listened to Eisen wheeze and rattle as he spoke of the dead days of Beforeit – the days that Murph, when he chose to speak, called "darlin' but damned."

He sat crouched sometimes in the low branch of a dead tree like an ectoplasmic ornament on it while Berg beat the air with his wild words and told of the evil that was in and of the very fiber of the days of Beforeit.

Berg's words sang in the pale air. And Eisen's hope, as he spoke reverently of what might yet be, was naked and wounded and Lank suffered for the man. For himself? He wondered.

During the long nights, while burrowed into his assigned cubicle in the anteroom of the temple, Lank stared out into the darkness and made it dance with luminous ghosts that cavorted and twirled for his edification in the molecular dark and he was amazed. At times, alarmed. Among the ghosts he conjured with the juju of his excited brain were wild dogs and ferocious rats – hunters of human flesh, the scourges of Afterit, both a pestilence upon the land.

Was Eisen daring in his dreams? Lank wondered. Or was he that most remarkable of men, a dervish whirling in the soft dust and warm sun that combined to make prophetic visions a mundane and everyday matter of ripe hope and flowering truth?

Lank did not know. Dressed as he now was in the penitential thongs that bound his legs and in the wolfhide loincloth that were the badges of his call to Coindom, he suffered ecstasies of doubts and in the gray mornings would walk down to the stream which was polluted with a thin film of ash that seemed to settle on it during the night like a gross dew and plunge his face into its coldness that was both a shock and a reminder that the world was real and

full of mornings that were empty of ghosts and dry of desire.

After his morning ablutions, Lank would walk back to the temple of Murph and kneel on the steel floor, his buttocks almost touching it, his legs bent and stiff. He would wait, speaking a word or two to the others with him, also waiting. Only one of them smiled. Lincoln of the Copper Clan. With foreheads creased and uneasy sweat making dirty runnels down their bodies, they would nod and answer briefly. It was enough. It was essence they all sought, not clumsy words to bounce back and forth among themselves. The essence of Murph and Afterit was to be theirs and they were preparing.

One day, Berg spoke to them of divination. "Curl the entrails, twist them so," he chanted, taking the tangled coils of punched tape from the hollowed-out stone vessel that sat forever at the maw of Murph.

Lank thrust his head forward to rest, tensely, on his upright and bony knees. How? How did one decide among possibilities? "

Berg circled the pile of punched tape, his eyes mere shadows in the deep sockets of his skull. "Read the choices. Choose among options. So." He flicked a finger with a long, filed nail and lifted ropes of tape, twirled them once, tore them and then let them fall like white water. He bent down. His students inclined their bodies and crawled forward. Berg said, "You can go or you can stay. Coins, for such a decision, are sufficient. But when you can go, or come, or stay – then, ah, then, more is needed. Then do we Survives hesitate in the darkness of doubt and come to the temple to be told. Here are the answers virginal and pure, as they fall. They speak to us. See here. Look there." Berg read the message that Murf's entrails conveyed:

1000101
0100111
1100001
0010000

Lank did not understand. At his elbow, Lincoln of the Copper Clan belched his own dismay.

Berg whirled around to face them. "The message is clear. 0010000 lies heavy on the top of the other fragments, barring them from clear perception. The Survive should stay."

"But 1000101 is longest," Lank observed. "Means that –?"

"The longest is the weakest," Berg told Lank. "Its entire message is unreadable and therefore suspect. The other two are borne down by the weight of 0010000. They are, therefore, less desirable options. And study further. 0010000 is touched with the secretions of Murph. Further proof of the validity of its message."

Lank reached out and touched the dark spot on the piece of tape with a nervous finger. He put the tip of his finger into his mouth and screwed up his face. The oily taste of Murph unnerved him.

"You, Lank," said Berg. "Do you comprehend?"

Lank hesitated. "I understand that Murph's mysteries are many. I hope to learn to see behind their veils."

"You shall. Persevere."

Lincoln spoke. "Does it hold for as many choices as – as seven?"

"For a multitude," Berg replied. "Coins are for making most decisions. Murph himself helps us to make the rest – those more complex and difficult. Again, let us examine."

Berg gathered another pile of tape, shredded it and threw it high into the air. It fell down about his feet and he bent to it, his finger moving rapidly. Then, rising, he read again the message that would answer the hypothetical question he posed: "To climb High Hill, or to go down into Lost Valley, or to take refuge in the mouth of the sleeping crater. Or to remain."

The tape, fragmented by Berg, spoke to the throng in terms of the printout.

"... And the voice of the turtle was heard in the land...."

"... had a little lamb, little lamb. ..."

"The square root of .9990876 is. ..."

"... extra X chromosome leads to. ..."

"The Greatest Show on Earth."

Berg mused momentarily over the tapes and then looked up at his Coiners. "With what you have learned so far, one of you tell me which is the correct decision based on the feedback from Murph. Lincoln, you."

Lincoln, Lank saw, fell into a fit of worry. His lips opened and closed. His nostrils flared.

He said, "I know nothing of turtles, less of lambs. But X. That I know. Murph says X is the answer. X, we know, marks the spot. The Survive should therefore remain on the spot and he must not venture forth."

"And you, Lank?" Berg prompted.

"I have seen the moon hanging in the trees at the top of High Hill. I have seen the stars dance among the branches – first here, then there. I found it beautiful. The Greatest Show on Earth. The Survive should climb to the top of High Hill."

Berg threw out his hands and turned swiftly, making obeisance in the direction of Murph. "Well done, Lank. You have eyes for seeing and a heart that leaps to truth's music. May Murph bless you."

Lank felt the heat in his cheeks as he blushed and the resounding impact on his back made by Lincoln's hard hand. He would make a good Coiner, he felt sure.

By day, Lank learned. At night, when the red bats flew like lost and forgotten thoughts through the temple, he sat beside Murph or walked around his vast bulk, admiring, awed, above all grateful for the role he played in relation to the god. He would touch the lights flickering and feel the insignificance of his own candle that he had made with a mixture of oil from the Place of Pits and syrup oozing from a nearby bluetree. He would light his candle at the undying fire burning in the middle of the temple and place it in front

of Murph, a tiny offering of light and heat that he hoped would symbolize his own upward reaching. Like the candle's flame, Lank's thoughts shot up and he never doubted his own ability to reach – to reach perhaps the nearest star.

After the bats had fled and flown away to their caverns and after Lank's candle had sputtered its life away, the women who tended the temple and Murph's needs came to the Coiners as was their custom. Their hands stained with grease and their eyes listless, they eased themselves into the small cubicles and offered themselves matter-of-factly to the surrogates of the god, Murph. They had seen many, had huddled with so many faceless, voiceless bodies, that they did not cry out in joy or moan with pleasure when they burst apart and came floating down again to remember the chill of the night and the smell of sweat between their [illegible]

Lank, his hands on the shoulders of the woman beneath him who had dull hair and sagging skin, cursed her and himself for the joylessness of their union.

"By Coins," he cried in the moist dark, "I would that you had a belly in which I could build a large fire. I would that you would tear my face with your claws and call me Murph."

The woman pushed against his chest and eased herself out from under him. "I wrap my legs around one who would be a god," she snarled. "I go out into the night from an animal." And she was gone.

Lank, tired and angry, lay fetus-like in the empty dark of his cubicle and knew that she was right. But it would not always be so. Already he felt Murph's magic working in him. He was no longer one of the roving bands of hunters that fought the wild dogs and reveled over feasts of rodents spitted on open fires. He was Lank, a Coiner, and the world was endless. There was no telling where he might go, what he might see and do, wrapped in the thongs of penitence but dreaming of miracles yet to be which he would father.

"Lank, you there?"

It was Lincoln, squatting at the entrance to Lank's cubicle.

"I am here," Lank called out, "or as much of me as that witchwoman has left. What say you, Lincoln?"

Lincoln crawled into the darkness. His nearness to Lank seemed to loosen his tongue and his words, when they came, fell over one another. "I will fail," he said. It was a statement of sad fact. "I see nothing in the maw of Murph but some paper with holes punched in it. I try and I try but still I see only paper. What will happen to me, Lank?"

Lank said nothing for a long moment. "One must learn the paths of mazes. In the Place of Pits, one must walk warily or the living light will seize one and death will come. Give yourself time, Lincoln."

Was it a sob Lank heard in the darkness or a bat bumping into the outer wall? Lank knew that bats did not bump into walls. He put out a hand in the darkness and gripped Lincoln's jaw. "Shut this," he told the boy. "Open this," he added, his knuckles rapping Lincoln's forehead.

"– scared," came Lincoln's last word.

"Did you have a woman tonight?"

"Two."

"And?"

"Both laughed at me and my limp trying."

"There is a waterfall near High Hill with smooth stones for sliding."

"I know it."

"Have you ever –?"

"I slid often when I was a boy."

"You're not still slow with sleep?"

"No."

"Then let's go."

They eased themselves out of the cubicle and ran silently through the littered courtyard toward High Hill looming in the distance.

Around them - in the bushes and scampering over rocks

– were night creatures, small and furred or winged with eyes like golden glass. On four feet and two, the creatures crept or leaped from the path of the two travelers moving swiftly and with little sound through the shadows of which they were a living part.

When they arrived at the waterfall, they burst into the clearing that surrounded it and threw themselves face down on the ground near the bank of the beginning stream and let their faces lie a minute in the cold water. Raising their heads, they shook them and showered the ground around them. They looked at each other and laughed. Their journey had been to more than merely the waterfall. Lank knew he had led Lincoln back to an earlier time, now dead forever, when Lincoln had been but a child and Afterit was little more than a rather fond memory of foraging for green berries in the field and being safe in the great pen where all the children were kept during the long nights to keep them safe from wolves and wild dogs. There, in the pen, the children huddled against one another to keep warm in the chill darkness and told each other stories. "I saw where the red bats sleep. It's Murphless there – scary." They mothered and fathered each other until the eye of the sun opened to welcome a new Afterit day.

"It is the same," Lincoln said, looking up at the natural trough formed by the junction of several rocks worn smooth by the steady path of the falling water. The trough sloped down and over the deep pool directly beneath the waterfall. "But I am not."

Lank looked at him. "Where have you misplaced the boy that once you were?"

Lincoln, puzzled, shook his head.

"He hides somewhere in your heart. Perhaps he sleeps."

A smile from Lincoln and a "Let's slide!"

Lank let Lincoln beat him to the mouth of the trough as they scrambled up over rocks, clasping slimy vines to aid their ascent and slipping back two steps for every one they took upward over the wet and treacherous structure of the

waterfall.

At the apex of the fall, Lincoln stepped aside, gestured. "You go first, Lank."

"Afraid?"

Lincoln threw a fist and Lank stepped backward, grinning, as Lincoln leaped into the trough and was gone, a slippery fish flopping happily down amid the spray to splash into the pool below.

"Whoooosshh!" Lincoln sputtered, raising his hand in a wave. And then, diving beneath the surface, he disappeared

Lank letting himself feel joy and striving mightily to forget Murph and obligations and the demands that manhood made, plunged headfirst down the trough and felt himself sinking into the water. It was ghostly. He had lost temporarily a part of himself and found another, almost forgotten younger part. He surfaced and spouted water from his mouth and then Lincoln's hands, invisible beneath the surface of the water, found his ankles and dragged him down into the murky stillness Lank freed himself and they rose together, sputtering and laughing, and swam to the closest shore.

"Again!" Lincoln cried, already halfway up the rock pile. "Come on, Lank!"

Lank followed his friend, feeling suddenly fearful. He remembered that he had not Tossed an hour ago in the cubicle. He had elected to go sliding down waterfalls. He muttered an apology to Murph and made up his mind to atone when day came.

Lincoln slid down a second time. Above the pool, his joy ruptured, Lank laughed loudly in response to Lincoln's taunts, as if Beforeit had never been and he had no worry in this or any other world. He asked himself if certain actions – harmless ones – were not safely taken sans Coin. Lincoln had been afraid and Lank had thought he could cure that fear as he sometimes cured aches in the bellies of companions who had sucked too long on the stalks of the gumplant. Suppose he had Tossed. And suppose his Coin had

commanded him not to go to the waterfall. What of Lincoln then? What then of Lincoln lying alone in his cubicle with his arms wrapped around fear and his heart heavy with worry?

"Lank! Look!"

Lank looked down and saw that Lincoln had caught and was holding up a flopping catfish.

"Shall we eat it, Lank? I'm starved!"

"Ask me not," Lank intoned solemnly in an almost flawless imitation of Murph's voice. "Your Coin must declare the course for you to follow."

Lincoln roared with laughter and then, thinking that Lank might be displeased at his levity despite the almost mocking imitation of Murph, he tossed his copper Coin with his free hand and caught it deftly on the back of the same hand.

"By Murph!" he cried, tossing the catfish high into the air. "My Coin has decreed. We shall hunger, Lank."

Lank, still perched on the top of the trough, smiled down at Lincoln who flopped and twisted in the water as if he were of its very substance, a wind-whipped wave. Lincoln had Tossed, Lank told himself. He had been afraid. Lank realized that Lincoln had little to fear. His instincts were true and did not betray him. The catfish was free. But I, he thought, decided to slide down waterfalls. I decided Coinlessly. The image of the rebellious girl drifted across the landscape of his vision and he felt weary and afraid. And not Beforeit either if Murph could be believed. *Could* it. And not Beforeit either if Murph could be believed. *Could* be believed? Lank shuddered. Somewhere in the distance something with a throat and tongue roared, perhaps at the moon that was directly overhead on its journey that would end with another Toss. There was tomorrow, Lank reminded himself. Tomorrow – today actually – there would be time for atoning. He released his grip on the rocks and slid down the trough, hands held high above his head, flashing like an arrow into the water beside Lincoln whose laughter was drowned for Lank as he sank beneath the surface

and swam there alone for as long as he could hold his breath.

In the ordered world of Afterit, everything had its time and its season. Came the cusp of the new moon. Shriveled seeds were planted the next day. When the sun was hottest over Lost Valley, dances were danced and songs sung – harvest. During the slow falling snows of winter, the people lighted fires and talked among themselves of the birth of Murph when wolves had howled their hallelujahs throughout the long night and flung them up at the stars in the sky. There was Beforeit and that was bad. There was, now, Afterit, and if it too was bad, it was at least not bad in the same way. No mushroom clouds marred the horizon and no missiles stitched the fabric of the sky like evil needles. A time to sow and a time to reap. A time to decide and a time to atone. Signs and portents. A bee dead on the velvet petals of a green rose. Frogs falling from the sky. And Murph watched all. The time of the Toss was coming, the first of the two held each year.

Lank and Lincoln, Eisen and Berg – all felt the dread day approaching and made themselves ready for –

The Toss.

And the choosing of the Tosser this time.

In the pen where the children were corraled, there was growing tension that led to anger, and anger in its red turn bred fights. The children, except for the very youngest, knew that one of them would be selected, would feel the Coin heavy in his or her hand and would be the instrument of Murph and afterward, after he or she had tossed, many would die in the halls and wild rooms of Randland.

In Murph's words, "As it was Beforeit, is not now and never ever again shall be!"

Lank walked near the end of the processional line of Coiners led by Eisen and Berg that was making its slow weaving way through the gray dawn toward the corral that held the children. Lincoln walked behind Lank.

"Lank," he whispered. When there was no immediate reply, he lifted his foot and kicked Lank's ankle. "Lank!"

"Sssstt!" came Lank's response. "Quiet!"

"I was once the Chosen," Lincoln persisted. "Were you ever?"

"No such luck. Be still. We're here."

The procession split into pieces as it came up to the gate of the corral – one man to the left, the next one to the right, the two separating lines of bodies taking up stations at intervals around the rusted wire mesh of the corral behind which the children stared and waited, waited and stared. There was none of the usual giggling from them, no single word did any one of them speak as the chanting of the Coiners began: *"In the shining of the sun is he; in the white veils of the moon does he hide. Murph manages. He will deliver us from Randland."* The chanting reached a thin crescendo and suddenly halted. Somewhere in the crowded corral, a baby began to cry.

Eisen stepped up to the gate and unlocked it with a lead key. "Those of you who have not yet known ten summers, forward!"

In the sea of children, waves arose. Small bodies moved. Hands scratched hides. Feet shuffled. Girls and boys of less than ten years and therefore ineligible to participate in the Toss, moved toward the beckoning Eisen, past him and on to the steady-standing Berg who showed them where to wait and, with fingers to his lips, commanded silence. Soon a nervous group of children stood gathered around Berg like a living cloak. They studied his face and plucked at his robe. He counted them. Fourteen.

Eisen swung shut the gate of the corral and turned to his brother, awaiting a signal. Berg nodded. Eisen raised his arms and the adults who had been standing behind the trunks of blasted trees and lurking in the scrawny bushes began to edge and inch forward. Their eyes darted from Eisen to Berg and on to the children. Fear and reverence battled for control of their glances. Neither won.

Berg announced, "The Tosser is to be chosen. Attention shall be paid." He took a Coin from the pocket of his cloak and held it up to catch and fling back the light streaming down from the weak sun. Then, turning, he expertly tossed the Coin to his brother who caught it, stepped away from the children and then summoned the two standing closest to him to approach.

When they stood in front of him, the chubby girl and the pimpled boy, he said to the girl, "You will call it. Ready?"

She nodded.

Eisen tossed.

The girl shouted, "Heads!"

"Heads!" repeated Eisen a second later after the Coin had come down and he had slapped it on the back of his hand. "You Win," he told the girl. He gestured to the boy who went back to the corral.

It was Berg's turn to Toss. He summoned another pair of children, two girls this time. He flipped his Coin. A moment later, one of the girls returned to the corral a Loser.

The ritual was repeated until the fourteen children had become seven. With a bow to Eisen, Berg Tossed again and again until, at last, only one boy remained.

"The Chosen!" exclaimed Berg, lifting the child and holding him up and out to the crowd of adults. A woman ran forward and touched the child's bare foot. A man muttered something and looked away. The mother of the child, recognizable by her shivering, shrank back and away from the flesh of her flesh. Such a reaction was not uncommon. To become the Chosen was to become an instrument of Murph and the dealer of death to some, escape to others. Human bonds were thereby broken temporarily. The Chosen was more than blood and bone and less than a god.

Berg set the child down on the ground, took his hand firmly in his own and walked away from the crowd.

"A fine broth of a boy," Lank whispered to Lincoln,

repeating the words he had often heard Murph speak in his booming but buttery voice when he was calm or caught in a fit of temperance. "A fit candidate to Toss."

Lincoln agreed.

Lank, by pushing and stepping on a toe here and another there, while beckoning to Lincoln to follow his eager example, managed to get himself in place just behind Eisen as the procession reformed and began to wend its way toward the rude altar that stood in the center of Lost Valley, shrouded by mists and haunted by the shades of the dead who had Lost in other earlier Tosses.

It took them fifteen minutes to reach Lost Valley. The crowd of people who had followed hard behind the Coiners, spread out around the altar. In the distance could be heard the sound of the beaters crying out their orders and the crashing of their cymbals as they drove the reluctant participants, those who had hidden in the hope of escaping this time, into the circle of people standing around the altar.

The altar was a symbolic mound of debris composed of charred wood, twisted metal and white and broken bones. Such was the dais on which the solemn, dirty-eyed child stood after having been helped up to his position of temporary eminence by Berg and Eisen. He stood there, staring out at the crowd, smiling somewhat proudly at his mother, grasping the Coin invisible in his small fist. He seemed to be enjoying his moment of power.

Lank edged forward. As he approached the grove of trees near the altar, he saw her, the girl he had encountered at the Place of Pits. She was running fast in his direction, her hands held high to shield her body from the blows of the beaters that were herding the ones who had hidden into the area surrounding the altar. She stumbled and fell and a beater brought his clout down hard on her shoulders. She screamed something at him. He laughed and struck again. She rose and darted from beneath a third descending blow and climbed quickly up into one of the trees.

Lank took up a position below the tree in which she had

taken refuge. He watched as she placed her Coin in the cavity of her right ear, ready. He looked toward the Chosen.

"Toss!" A sibilant murmur rippling softly through the crowd in which the beaters had stationed themselves to verify the results of each individual Toss once it had been consummated.

"Toss!" A plea that many secretly wished would go unheeded.

And then a rising tide of sibilance accompanied by a swaying of bodies and a glinting of circular silver and copper omens in the air as the crowd tossed their own Coins over and over agin, urging the child to action.

"Tossss, Tossss, Tossss!"

A hush. A collective taking in of breath. A sterile silence.

The boy raised his fist, opened it, curled back a thumb, let the Coin rest on his crooked index finger. And then he Tossed. At the same instant, oddly ecstatic, he cried, *"Tails you Win; Heads you Lose!"*

Up, his Coin. Down into his tiny palm. Up the eyes of the crowd. Up their own Coins. Down.

"Heads!" screamed the child hysterically, falling on the heap of refuse and clawing at his face.

Lank looked down at his own hand and the Coin it held. *Tails.* He nearly collapsed with relief but, making a stern effort, remained erect and expressionless. Then he thought to look up at the girl. Her head, he saw, was held high, her eyes glowed. Then, he reasoned, she had Tossed Tails too. But he was wrong. She eased herself off the limb of the tree, dropping gracefully to the ground and began to move away from the altar, from Eisen and Berg, from what her life had been – in the company of all the other Losers.

Someone touched Lank's arm. He turned, his eyes reluctantly leaving the girl.

"Lank."

It was Lincoln. He was holding out his hand. Lank looked at the Coin in Lincoln's palm. *Heads!*

"I –" Lincoln began. "Goodbye, Lank." He seized Lank's shoulders so hard that pain became Lank's momentary companion. And then he was gone, running lightly over the ground, not looking back. Lank took a step in the direction Lincoln had taken – in the direction the girl in her undeniable beauty had taken – and halted. Lincoln was soon lost to sight in the mob. The girl was visible on the outer edge of the crowd and Lank could not help himself. He moved toward her, the lure of evil in his nostrils. She was a scent, a spoor he felt compelled to follow. He had lain with her. But he did not dwell on that now. He wanted to see what she would do when she and all the other Losers made their unlucky way down into the bowels of Randland.

Lank loped along, keeping his distance while keeping the girl in sight. Amid the wails and weeping and tearing of hair, the beaters moved like wraiths, making certain that no one escaped their destiny. For an hour, Lank followed the line of Losers. The Coins, for them, had decreed. This was the way it was in the beginning of Afterit and had been ever since, Lank knew. Through most of the day, the crowd moved forward, driven relentlessly by the unsmiling beaters. Lank continued to follow them. To Randland.

When at last they arrived, Lank stationed himself several hundred yards away from the twisted ruins. He began to imagine what Randland must have been Beforeit. Tall its towers. Rich with lore and secrets its every corner. Its junctures of steel and stone were the very meldings of mystery. But now – Now Randland lay, a crippled giant, struck down by the pressed buttons of newer and deadlier Davids whose names were lost in the maze of history. Lank felt the flesh rise in little lumps on his skin as he sorrowed for Randland, for what was as much as for what might have been, for himself so much a rabbit underneath the guise of the lion he sometimes assumed.

Randland's twisted girders reached up like tortured fingers to scrape against the sky. Windows – cyclopean eyes –

gaped. Lank thanked Murph that he had Won. It might not always be so. Murph would direct and decree and meanwhile there was Randland and Beforeit would never come again.

Lank tore loose a tiny branch of bluetree and sucked the juices from it. In his mouth, his Coin drowned in the sweetness. In his mind, Randland hummed and whined and Murph was a young god with the juices running hotly through his joints and all the world was new and unlike Afterit. He watched the beaters drive the last of the people into the ruins where they went wailing and disappeared, feet first, into the belly and bowels of Randland.

For a long moment afterward, there was silence. Lank thought about Lincoln and the no-name girl. Down there. Losers, both. He, a Winner. Then the first of the many screams reached him. Thin, like an atonal piping, they came to his ears and wrestled with his senses. His eyes *saw* the screams. They were bright red – bloodied. They were ribbons of torn flesh flapping painfully in an invisible and sudden wind.

He bit down hard on the bluetree branch, split it in two and spat it out. He wrapped his arms around his head to shield his hurt ears. He should not be here. He should be back in the shrine of Murph listening to the reassuring words of Eisen and Berg. But something held him. Something more than simple common sense. Something visceral. An image of the no-name girl flitted in front of his eyes now dimming with the coming of night. Her body haunted him and his, in the memory of that moment after their meeting, hunted and explored throughout her own. There were many women, most willing; those who were not could be forcefully taken and enjoyed, Coins willing, and then forgotten. Why then this attraction to this one – this evil one? Lank listened to the screams, his every muscle tight and every thought in his head dark and terrible. Lincoln was down there somewhere. Strange, Lank thought, how friendship is conceived in the womb of loneliness. Its father,

fear. Lincoln of the Copper Clan. What mystical beasts might be stalking him now in the underworld of Randland? And the girl. What of her?

Lank knew only – made himself remember – that evil and good walked the earth now as Beforeit and Murph managed all. A man – or a woman – had the singular option of defying the established order and that option, if taken, would bring, in some near or far time, its fate. No-name girl had come into her time. But Lincoln – Oh, Lank thought, what was his crime that was the first signpost on his road to the atonement of Randland?

Lank seized his stomach in both hands as anxiety gnawed at him. He clutched his genitals and squeezed. He rose and relieved himself in a flood, uncontrolled and sudden.

An hour later, his eyes still open and his mind alive with uneasiness, he heard the voice. All that it said did not reach him. But words – a few – did.

"– *[illegible]*"

The voice was vaguely familiar but Lank could not identify it. It had in it the ring of authority. It might have been Lank's own voice raised in timber and tone until it became a little more than merely human. Whose voice was it? Where had he heard it? Lank did not know who it was that had spoken but he knew that it had come from Randland. Alert, he reached above him and gripped a low-hanging branch and pulled himself up. When he was nestled in the juncture of tree limb and trunk, he stuck his index finger into his mouth and withdrew his Coin. Tossing, he held his breath. The Coin directed him to remain. He was both glad and sorry. He was terrified.

He watched as they came, the first of them, rising up between the girders and smashed stones like injured phoenixes that have not quite survived the fire. Less there were than the number that had gone down hours earlier. Lank strained to see. He had never once dared come this close to Randland. The survivors crept and staggered out of the ruins, some moaning, some silent. Blood leaked from some.

Bruises marred the bodies of others.

She was there, one of the last to appear. Her black hair hung in damp ropes over her shoulders and breasts. She held her head high but on her temple a helix of white bone showed through its frame of bloody flesh. Steady was her walk. She bent to help an old woman who had fallen by her side.

Lank leaned forward, pushing leaves out of his line of vision. She moved on, leaving the woman to lie on the spot where she had fallen and from which she would never stir again.

Lincoln? Lincoln did not appear. Lank realized that he remained in Randland, his punishment accomplished, his crime perhaps never to be known. Lank leaped down from the tree and ran swiftly to the right. He ran parallel with the line of stragglers for most of the night, always aware of the girl – moving in toward her when she faltered and then withdrawing when she straightened and moved

One by one and two by two, the stragglers left the line and went off to seek their own caves and burrows. Lank moved in swiftly and cut the girl off from the rest.

She displayed no surprise at his unexpected appearance. She said nothing. This time, she reached for no weapon.

"I am Lank," he said harshly.

"I am Doll."

"You have escaped from Randland."

"Again."

"How many times have you Tossed?"

"Sixteen."

Then, Lank calculated, she had seen eighteen sets of seasons come and go, having begun to Toss twice a year when she was ten as had he and all the other children. "I come," he said, "to inquire of the fate of a stripling One Lincoln of the Copper Clan. With you he was. His hair was the color of the spring sun when it rides low in the west. His eyes were the color of the bluetree flowers."

"Were," she sighed. She sank to the ground, putting out one hand to support herself, letting her head slip to one side and come to rest on her shoulder.

Lank asked, "You saw him?"

"I saw him. He was among the first of us to die."

Lank could not help himself. Unmanly it might be but – He threw back his head and flung his pain in the form of blasphemies upward to the uncaring beacons of the stars. No tears came but at that moment his very blood was salty with his inward weeping.

"You condemn Murph," the girl observed. "As it should be."

"No!" Lank bellowed, regretting his words.

"Yes." Doll rose and began to walk away from him.

He hurried after her. She did not shrink from his reaching hand. He did not bring it quite close enough to touch her as he had at first intended to do.

"What happened?" Lank asked her. "To Lincoln?"

Doll – did she smile? Sneer? "It is for those of us who Lost to know. Winners need not care. But there are others who will talk, unlike me, and tell throughout the days to come of their encounter in Randland. Go and seek them out. Sit at their feet and listen to their fear."

And she was gone into the black jaws of the night, past the teeth of the trees.

Lank, standing stiffly as he watched her go, wondered about the nature of Winning. How could it be that he who had Won could feel so much the Loser?

CHAPTER TWO

"Drinking buttermilk through the week – whiskey on a Sunday!"

Murph sang boisterously in his shrine and the Coiners, Lank among them, bowed obedient heads as they crouched before the screened amplifier through which Murph's words

[redacted]

"Portrait of the programmer as a dirty old man. Eisenberg!"

Eisen sidled forward. Berg bowed.

The Coiners raised their heads slightly, waiting for what might now happen.

"Mighty is Murph," intoned Berg.

"– Murph," echoed his brother.

"Whiskey on a Sunday," chanted the Coiners.

"Eisenberg, the probabilities of nuclear warheads getting through our missile net are nil. Null and void. So stop your fidgeting and your hot line palaver and sit down here, me boyo. Pawn to king four. Your move, my man."

"Murph, I can see it from here. Do it for me, will you, good friend? Move the red bishop to queen six. Check."

. ."*By all the saints! It's mate as well!"*

"Just so."

"I should have recognized the glint in your evil eyes, Eisenberg. I know it well. I've lived with it for all these months. It's the light of a man who knows Presidents listen when he mumbles and empires shudder and send their gold to Swiss banks when his equations near completion. Seriously, Eisenberg. The missile net is secure. They wouldn't try to breach it. They know we'd retaliate. Statistically, we could kill them nine point three times over. So will you stop whispering in that old fool's ear?"

[redacted]

"President Lear is no fool."

"He is worse. He is a man with a mission."

"His mission is to protect this land and our people. If the invasion of San Francisco takes place as Intelligence predicts it will, we have no choice but to –"

"We have! We have the choice – or at least we had it a month ago – of initiating diplomatic maneuvers. Their crown colonies aren't that important to us. And San Francisco could be unmoored and floated to a less strategic location along with its devilish bacterian barrier."

"You are a brilliant strategist, Murph. But a sentimental slopbucket as well. Use your brain and let your nervous system settle down. I'll tell you something, Murph. Once and for all, I'll tell you. Now you listen. You came from Ireland which is still wallowing in the Dark Ages. It was safe there. Ireland has no minerals to speak of, no industry worth appropriating, no harbors, no missile bases. So it – and you – were let alone to enjoy your lakes and your hills. The children of darkness. That's what you were. But for me, it was a different story."

"With an unhappy ending. Like mine will ultimately and undoubtedly be."

"That remains to be seen. I was a child of the desert born with a gun in my hand and no silver spoon anywhere near my mouth. First, the kibbutz. Then the front lines. When I became a prisoner of war –"

"You told me what they did to you. Over and over you told me. They castrated you. You love telling me about it."

"They did that. And more. Now I fight on here in America."

"Against the Arabs?"

"Against the murderous nature of man."

"Eisenberg, Eisenberg, don't you see? You aren't fighting them – whoever they may be at the moment – you've joined them, for Christ's sake! Instead of an erect penis, you take – or want to take – that red attack lever in your

hand and pull it until sweet reason drowns in a sweat of sublimated sexuality. Call the President. Tell him –"

"No."

"I could order you to do it. I'm in charge of this project."

"I would not obey your order. I would say that you are losing your grip, Murph. I would show the President and every single cabinet member the words you wrote on the computer complex wall. Fuck war, you wrote. And worse."

"I was drunk."

"Murph."

"What?"

"Perhaps it is really true. Perhaps you really are losing your grip. Perhaps I will not have to lie about you when the time comes. For example, the tape. You've left it on again."

"Ooops! Sorry about that. I'll shut it off."

"Destroy it."

"Not a chance. I want it. As a souvenir. After it happens – after you and I make it happen – if I survive – I'll have something to remember you by."

"Drinking buttermilk through the week," Lank sang with the other Coiners when silence came. "Whiskey on a Sunday."

The water of the stream that tumbled down over smooth and slimy rocks formed a pool in a low basin where it collected itself before spilling on down the slope of High Hill.

Doll knelt on the gray moss beside the pool. She bent forward, holding her long hair back with both hands, and dipped her forehead into the water to soothe the throbbing pain of the wound on her temple. When she lifted her head after holding it submerged for several minutes, she let the drops of water drain from her face and fall into the pool, fragmenting her reflection, splitting it into shards that rippled and swayed, came together and separated again.

She got up and began to search the area surrounding the pool. When she found what she had been looking for – a

baybush – she stripped the leaves from one of its slender branches. She plucked a few bayberries and pulped them together with the leaves in her strong hands until she had made a thick, sticky poultice of them. She tore off a few of the tough tendrils hanging from a nearby vine and used them to bind the medicinal poultice to the raw wound on her forehead. She moved away from the pool and off into the night, pain and the memory of Randland her only companions.

As she clambered up a pile of scarred and blackened timbers that blocked her path, she lost her balance and slid dizzily down the other side. Her Coin fell from its resting place in the fleshy socket of her ear. Sprawled beside it, she cursed it and her own clumsiness. She rolled over on her back and stared up at the night sky that was salted with

The night was warm, the grass soft beneath her body. She rolled over on her side and propped her head up in one hand. She stared down at her Coin. She would leave it there where it now lay. She would go on without it. She had no need of it. She wanted to be free of it and all that it represented. She wanted to make and take her own chances. But she was well aware that it would be unnecessarily risky to go about the land Uncoined. The beaters would find her and question her when the time of the next Toss came and she would be brought before Eisen and Berg and perhaps – She touched the Coin with the tip of her index finger. She lifted it, idly tossed it. No, she would need her Coin for now. But the time was coming – she had felt it coming for months – when she would finally renounce it and, with it perhaps, her own right to live.

Remembering Randland and what had happened to her there, she began to feel cheated because she had survived. Thinking of survival, she recalled Lincoln and the one who had named him to her. The one who called himself Lank. Again she heard Lank's crying out when she told him that Lincoln had died in Randland. She remembered the night,

the recent night, that had brought the man Lank upon her –! She laughed aloud and lay back. Upon her indeed! Her response, after the incident, had been automatic. But he had been too clever and too quick for her. She had almost managed to kill him. Perhaps she would yet if he did not, in the meantime of their meetings, die of fright at her occasional Coinlessness. Doll's laughter was loud in the night that was empty of all save silence, which she shattered again and again with her gusts of bright sound.

At last, she rose and adjusted the poultice on her forehead. The pain seemed to be lessening. In the east, day was already doing battle with the waning night. Soon the bats would blink their blind way to slumber and the orange eye of the sun would look down upon all that it had seen so many times before.

Doll moved in the direction of the approaching day and, as time passed, became one with it. She came to her destination – her cavern – just as the doves of day began to coo and shake their wings that were so full of sleep and lice.

The cavern had been her home for the past several years. She lived in it alone except for the wild male dog who had wandered wounded and in pain into its mouth, seeking a place to die on one long ago midnight. Now, as she entered the cavern, the dog leaped up at her from its curled sleep and barked a rowdy welcome. She grappled with him and his joy, speaking at first soft words and then harsh ones to temper the animal's enthusiasm. She had sat, the day the dog came, crouched in a corner of the cavern, fearful that he would, in his pain and frenzy, attack her. When she saw that he would not – could not – she had gotten up and gone to him His snarling and gnashing of teeth subsided when she washed the wound in his hind haunch and fed him mashed meat and milk she had taken from the dugs of the mountain goat that morning before she had killed it.

"Down, Hound," she ordered the dog.

He dropped to his four feet and thrashed his tail against her bare legs.

She reached above her head and unbound the rope that supported the sack of dried meat. Tossing a piece to Hound, she ate as ravenously as did the dog. When she was satisfied, she rose and raked out the dead ashes from the fire. She placed dry wood over the heavy stones. The fire she would kindle later would light the night to come and harbor her and Hound from things and men that prowled and preyed in shadows.

Yawning, she tested the straps that held the trip-trap. They were sound. Above the entrance to the cavern, supported in a woven net of cured rawhide, hung a heavy pitted boulder. Nearly invisible in the dust at the entrance to the cavern, was a small spike to which was attached a taut sliver of rawhide that ran up the wall of the cavern to the net overhead. Anyone entering and unfamiliar with the lay of this particular piece of Doll's land, would trip the spike and find himself or herself stunned by the weight of the falling boulder Doll yawned again and stretched. The boulder, the night fire, and the Hound were the weapons of her arsenal. Now it would be safe for her to sleep.

She lay down far back in the cavern in a nest of furs that she had gathered in recent months when they had been part of living beasts bounding through the world, like her, hunting. She sighed and reached out a hand as Hound came to her and curled himself up beside her. Her hand gripped the large dog's pelt and the animal muttered something she did not hear as he huddled beside her. Moments later, her grip relaxed as she slipped into sleep.

Hound, a few hours later, was the first to hear it. He snorted at the sound, rose up and growled

"*Dollll,*" came the cry from beyond the mouth of the [illegible]

Hound's bark was at first the only reply.

Doll, roused from sleep, struggled free of the furs in which she had been nestled and got to her feet. Instinctively, she felt along the wall of the cavern for the stone

knife she had sharpened and which she used in her hunting expeditions.

"Dollll!"

"Quiet!" Doll commanded and Hound stood his ground, silent, the hair on the back of his lean neck bristling. He looked up at her and then out into the dimness of evening beyond the cavern.

Doll went to the opening, skirting the hidden spike and peered out. "Who cries for Doll?"

"It is I. Raymond. Come down, Doll."

Raymond! Raymond was a member of the Copper Clan. An elder, in fact. What did he want of her, Doll wondered. She, too, had once been a member of the Copper Clan as a child. They had banished her for her irreverence where Coins were concerned. Raymond had sat at the head of the council that had ousted her. He had spoken hard words that gray day and she had heard them and tried to maintain a defiant attitude while fear ate her flesh like maggots. She had not seen him, except from a distance, since. And now he was here at the foot of the incline leading to her cavern's entrance.

"Doll," he called again. "Come down."

"What do you want of me, Raymond? I have not stolen from you or the Clan. I have made no trouble for you."

"Girl, come down!"

Doll took a step forward and then halted. She held Hound by the fur of his neck. Raymond, leaning on his staff below, looked angry, she decided. But his hands held no weapons. She moved forward. As she came abreast of him, he held out his arms to her. She hesitated and then moved into the circle of his embrace.

"You are well, Doll?"

"I am well, Raymond. What brings you to me?" She gloried for a moment in his strong embrace and then shrugged herself free of his arms.

"The Clan cares for its own," he replied. "But it has its

ways and among them is a caution in the face of that which is evil."

"Evil?"

Raymond turned and pointed down the incline toward a clump of baybushes. "One of us lies there. Lincoln is his name."

"Lincoln of the Copper Clan," Doll said, "died in Randland."

Raymond shook his head. "He lives, near death, down there. I found him half a mile from Randland this morning, crawling away from its terrors. I carried him back to the Clan. He is one of us. But a vote was called for and he was cast out. The Clan decided that he must be returned to Randland and his atonement. I was designated the one to bear him there."

Doll studied Raymond's face. "But you did not. You brought him here."

"I could not. He is the son of my sister."

"Why here, Raymond? Why did you bring him here?"

Raymond bent down and patted Hound's muzzle. "Since you left us, Doll –"

"Since you sent me away."

Raymond looked up at her and then quickly down again. "Since we banished you, I have seen you walking through Lost Valley and climbing High Hill and I have heard tales told of your ways. Hound here, I am told, is the beneficiary of those ways. He lives and is no longer wild."

Doll turned from Raymond to stare in the direction the sun was taking in its daily descent. She could not bear to look at Raymond – at the pain and guilt that sat so heavily on his face and swam in his old eyes.

"Doll, the boy lies near death in the baybushes."

"He is not of my tribe. My tribe is only the two of us – me and Hound. You made it so. All of you."

"I bear the bitterness of my decision, Murph knows," Raymond said "Help me, Doll. Help Lincoln Take him into your cavern. Care for him. I will find him a new Coin

and bring it to him. When he is well, he can make his own way alone as you have done. Doll, I beg you."

Doll moved away from Raymond and walked down the incline, Hound stalking at her heels. She knelt beside the clump of baybushes and moved their branches aside. She saw what Raymond had brought to her.

His face was dirty and red-welted. Blood flowed from a wound in his side. His hair was a tangled mass of gore. His eyes opened and looked around wildly at the sound of the baybush branches scraping against one another.

Raymond came up to Doll and knelt down beside her. "He is my sister's son," he said forlornly. "Help him – and me."

No, Doll thought, the denial a riot in her mind. "He is no kin of mine," she said.

"The pain –" Lincoln muttered in a voice that rasped against the air. And then, "Hi, diddle diddle, the cow jumped over the Coin."

"There is a wildness in his mind since Randland," Raymond whispered.

"Lift him," Doll said.

Raymond put his hands under Lincoln's arms. Doll clasped his ankles and together they carried him, stumbling over loose rocks and shifting earth, up to the cavern and inside it. Hound followed them, snuffling this new thing that had come among them.

"Put him down there on the furs," Doll ordered, releasing Lincoln's legs. "Be careful with him."

When Raymond had placed Lincoln on the furs, he rose and turned to Doll. "I will come to you as often as I can. I will bring you some fruit and other foods." He moved toward her so quickly that she had no time to react. He kissed her cheek. Hound, misinterpreting the motive for his sudden move, sprang at him. Doll seized the dog and whispered words that quieted him.

"I will not keep him here," Doll told Raymond. "I will wash and cover his hurt places, that is all."

Raymond seized her arms. "He will die if you do not!"

"He will live but not with me. There is a man who mourns this Lincoln, a man who calls himself Lank. He is a Coiner in the temple of Murph. I have come upon him twice. You must go and tell him to come here so that he may take away this broken bird and teach him to fly in other skies."

"Murph be praised!" Raymond sighed.

"Go, Raymond But first, take this stone vessel and fill it with water from the stream. I will light the fire to heat the water – and Raymond –"

"Yes, Doll?"

She fell into his arms and he held her tight until her hot tears ended. He touched her hair and raised her face to his and gently kissed her cheek again. "We are all broken birds, dear girl," he said. "Murph knows it to be true." And he was gone after the water.

Doll kindled the fire, her last few tears sputtering into steam among its rising flames.

On the pile of furs in the corner, Lincoln cried out in his delirium.

In the morning, when the sun was but a hint of pale light hidden behind High Hill, Doll unlocked her arms from around Hound's neck and got to her feet, yawning and stretching. She bent to scratch Hound's muzzle and the dog let out a yawn of its own that ended in a contented moan.

"The gray goats," she told the dog, "will be leaping on the Hill. I will go and leap among them and one of them will die."

She removed a wide sheaf of rawhide from a corner of the cavern and expertly bound it about her upper body to flatten and protect her breasts. She picked up a second piece and straddled it before drawing it up in front and behind and binding it with a thin cord which she tied around her waist. She slipped a rectangular piece of fur, which had a hole in its center, over her head and then tied strips of

softened bark about her arms and legs. When she had completed her preparations for the hunt, only her hands and feet showed below the protective coverings she had applied to her body. She removed her stone knife from its hiding place in the wall and looked down at Lincoln.

He was staring up at her from the pile of furs which the blood from his wounds had crusted in several places. He did not move.

Doll went and crouched down beside him. "The day is coming," she said. "With it comes hunger." She touched his cheek and he drew away quickly. "I am going now to hunt."

He said nothing but his eyes were on her face. Occasionally the glaze that covered them like a slick slime seemed to loosen and a feverish brightness burned in its place.

His cheek, when Doll had touched it, had been hot. She went outside and returned a few minutes later with a handful of leaves which she first dipped in the brew she had prepared the night before and then applied them to the wounds on Lincoln's forehead and left cheek. "Hold this to you until I return," she instructed him. "It will cool the fire that Randland has lit within you."

She got up and moved toward the mouth of the cavern. Hound bounded happily ahead of her.

"*Stay!*"

The single word Lincoln had flung after her made her halt and turn to face him. "I will come back. Wait for me." She turned again and marched off into the arms of the sun that shimmered now above the summit of High Hill, embracing it and her.

She began to run with long, graceful strides, fitting her rhythm to the eager barking of Hound who ran on ahead, circled back to come up behind and then bounded past her, his great tongue hanging out between the unsheathed daggers of his teeth, his eyes alight and clearly gleeful. The wound on her forehead troubled her but she ignored the

occasional sharp jabs of pain and began her paced ascent of High Hill as if the warm and unwary sun at the summit were her quarry.

She reached the bouldered area she had been seeking and leaped from one large rock to another, her bare and callused feet unbothered by their rough surfaces. The calluses on her feet were almost as invulnerable to pain as were the rocks themselves. She called out to Hound and he scrambled down an incline and bumped against her legs amid a hard cloud of flying gravel which his rapid descent had dislodged.

"Down," she whispered, raising her right hand.

The dog crouched obediently at her side behind an outcropping of rock. The only sound in the sunny silence was his heavy breathing.

They waited together, each watching, while the sun escaped into the sky. Soon, other prey appeared. The goats in the flock numbered nine. Doll chose the largest one, the one with the black horns sprouting on its head. Unaware of her presence, the goat shook its head, its beard blowing in the brief wind that chilled the Hill.

Doll spoke softly to Hound. "Old grandfather there is the one we will carry home. His flesh will not be tender but I do not want the young ones whose days have been few or the females whose teats are full to feed them. We will take the old one. Do you see him?"

Hound growled, the hair on the back of his neck rising.

Doll let out a shrill, piercing cry as she leaped to her feet and sprang up on the shelf of rock behind which she had been hiding with Hound. Her cry was a string that jerked the heads of the flock up in instant alarm. Their great eyes rolled in terror as they began their leaping flight from this apparition that had come so suddenly and with no warning among them.

Doll pursued them, leaping as they did, from rock to rock, her knife ready in her hand.

Hound was already among them, barking. Blending with

his deep bark were the thin bleats of the frightened animals. Doll called to Hound and he wheeled around and raced toward her. She pointed. He dashed after the horned goat she had selected. The rest of the herd veered from his path and began to scamper, still screaming, down the side of the Hill.

As Hound cut off the goat's decent, Doll moved swiftly toward the animal, anticipating its next move which might let it escape from her and the knife in her hand. It darted to the left and tried to run around her but Hound was there in its path. It drew back, its hooves scrabbling as it lowered its head to fight off what it obviously sensed was both danger and destiny. It moved swiftly forward, catching Doll momentarily off guard. Its head butted heavily against her thigh and she stumbled. Hound growled, crouching, watching, saliva slipping from his lips to the ground.

The goat leaped down the side of the Hill. Doll regained her balance and, with a loud cry, ran after it, leaving Hound behind in her rapid flight. Within minutes, she was abreast of the animal. She sprang upon it, bringing it down to the ground. It thrashed beneath her, bleating. Answering bleats came from the other and by now distant goats.

"Death give you greeting, grandfather," Doll muttered, her chest heaving. She wrapped her left arm around the goat's lean neck and drew its head back toward her chest. The knife in her right hand flew up and then down and the blood spurted from the goat's opened throat. The red geyser sprayed Hound as he came snarling up to them.

Doll held the animal tight against her body until both the geyser and the goat died, its body lying still in her arms, its paroxysms of agony ended. She released it and stood up. Hound sniffed about the body, slavering.

"He is dead," Doll sighed, tossing back her hair which had fallen about her face. "But he lives on in the herd that still roams High Hill. We need shed no tears for such a one. Hunger – ours – was the enemy he could not conquer." She bent and loosely tied the goat's hind legs together and then

lifted the carcass and slung it about her neck so that the body hung down behind her, the head only inches from the ground and swaying limply in its final and ultimate defeat.

Hound pranced beside Doll as they made their way down High Hill in the morning sun which saw all secrets and told none. They moved in silence through the trees at the base of the Hill and on to the open area where weeds raged in tangled confusion. When they came at last to the cavern entrance, Doll spoke in a low voice to Hound. He stalked forward, skirting the trip-trap and entered the gloom. A moment later, he came out and sat down, watching Doll.

So there were no invaders inside. She stooped and went inside. The sound of Lincoln's soft singing reached her ears and she almost smiled.

"Coin of the faithful, shelter me. Coin of the faithful, bless you me."

Doll bent double and dropped the dead goat to the floor of the cavern. She sat down and began to skin it.

Lincoln stopped singing and stared at her in silence, watching as her knife sundered the skin and her hands, which quickly became streaked and slippery with blood, began to peel back the animal's pelt to reveal bones and viscera. He moved back toward the sloping wall of the cavern. His eyes widened in fear and he put out one hand in front of him as if to ward off either a blow or the sight that met his shocked eyes.

Doll, intent on her work, paid him no attention.

His cry began as a whimper that quickly grew into a keening wail and then into a shrill scream.

"It is a goat," Doll shouted to him. "Only that and nothing more. It cannot hurt you." She raised the goat's head that she had severed from its body and held it up to Lincoln who scrambled to his feet and stood with his back pressed against the cavern wall, his face contorted with fright and his wail a low ululation.

"Quiet!" Doll snapped in the tone of voice she used when addressing Hound.

But Lincoln would not remain quiet. His breath came in short, choking gasps and, as Doll stood up and advanced toward him, he shook his head violently from side to side and edged away from her.

She halted some feet in front of him. As she stared into his face, she began to guess what it was that troubled him. No dead goat, she realized, could be the source of such fright. She looked back over her shoulder at the carcass lying bloody and broken behind her. For a moment, a vision flashed through her mind. *Randland!* She looked at Lincoln and then down at her own hands which were red and slippery. She bent and buried them in the coarse sand that covered the cavern floor. She rubbed them together until the sand had worn away all traces of gore and then she rose and began to move toward Lincoln. She spoke soft words and made wordless sounds and she found herself remembering another day when another wounded creature – Hound – had cowered and cried in the same corner which Lincoln now occupied. She summoned from somewhere inside herself the feeling she had had at that other hurt time with Hound and which had no name that she knew.

Lincoln seemed to relax somewhat as Doll moved closer to him. She blocked his sight of the goat and her fingers now were innocent and white. She reached out for his hand and he hid it behind him.

"Coin of the faithful," she crooned in a low, almost inaudible tone. "Coin of the faithful, shelter me. Coin of the faithful, bless you me." She eased closer to Lincoln and gently placed her hands on his shoulders and then raised them to enfold his face. "Lie down," she whispered. "Ah, how soft your face is with hardly any hair upon it yet. Lie down and I will take away the visions that have come here to haunt you." She pressed her hands on his shoulders and he squatted beside her.

"I Lost," Lincoln murmured.

"It is over now. Hide your face in this fur and I will tell you when you may look out again." She lifted one of the

furs on which Lincoln had been lying and wrapped it around his shoulders so that a part of it fell forward over his forehead to cover his face. "Now, lie easy."

As Lincoln huddled under the fur, Doll rose quickly and dragged the carcass of the goat outside the cavern where she quickly proceeded to finish what she had begun. When the meat was wrapped in skins and packed beneath cool rocks, she returned to the cavern and stirred the sand with her bare feet until the spilled blood disappeared among the grains of sand. She spitted the single haunch she had kept and rekindled the fire beneath it. As the meat began to roast in the flames, she went to where Lincoln lay still hidden in his fur. She gently removed it.

He looked up at her and then quickly around the cavern. "Randland," he whispered, pointing at the mouth of the [redacted]

Doll embraced him and he put his strong arms around her. "Randland," she repeated. "It is not for you."

"For you then?"

She shook her head.

As she did so, a fire that was not born of fever lit Lincoln's face. "We are Winners then!" he cried happily. "Murph be praised."

Doll disengaged herself from Lincoln's hold on her. She wanted to curse someone or something. Lincoln? No, he was not deserving of any curses – not even of the one given him by Murph in Randland. Not Hound. Herself? No. She wanted to curse the world of Murph and Randland and Coiners and Coins. The world that was desolate and empty of any refuge for Winners and Losers alike. Lincoln's bright eyes and even brighter vision of the two of them as Winners infuriated her.

"Murph be damned!" she shouted before she could swallow the words that welled up on the tide of her despair.

Lincoln released her suddenly and drew back from her in evident alarm.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I forgot you were once a Coiner."

"Murph be praised," Lincoln said, clearly testing her.

"So be it, then. Murph be praised."

Lincoln pointed at Hound. "A Winner, too?"

"Hound," Doll called. "Come here and meet one like you."

The dog, his tail thrashing back and forth, ambled over and nuzzled Doll.

"Winner," Lincoln said, reaching out to fondle the dog's head.

"Hound," Doll said.

Lincoln shook his head. "Winner."

Doll shrugged. "Hound the Winner." She left Lincoln and the dog playing in the corner and went to turn the spitted meat.

Later, the three of them ate their portions of meat. Hound worried a huge, dripping bone with his front paws, occasionally glancing across the lowering flames at his mistress and the stranger sitting beside her. Doll chewed, watching Lincoln who ate as hungrily as did Hound.

Lank found them that way when he appeared suddenly in the mouth of the cavern.

"Take care!" Doll called out when she saw him. "Wait!"

She got up and released the trip-trap and then beckoned to Lank who followed her into the cavern.

"An elder of the Copper Clan came to me at the Temple," Lank told her. "He said that Lincoln lived and was here."

Doll nodded and went to sit on the side of the fire near Hound.

Lank approached and squatted beside Lincoln who had paid little attention to his arrival. "Lincoln," he said, putting out his hand to touch Lincoln's arm.

Lincoln stared at Lank and then at the hand on his arm.

He covered Lank's hand with his own. "I know you," he said.

"It's me. It's Lank."

"Were we in the corral together with the other children?"

Lank glanced hastily at Doll whose expression told him nothing and everything. "No, Lincoln. We were together in the temple of Murph. Before the last Toss."

"I Won," Lincoln announced proudly. "The waterfall," he said suddenly, his face glowing. "We slid."

Lank smiled faintly. "Yes, we slid together. You caught a fish."

"I need no Coin to tell me you come as friend."

"Your friend lives," Doll said softly, "but a part of him was lost in Randland. You must take him from here and ask the Coiners to care for him. I hear they have potions and ointments that can cure even the ghosts in a man's skull."

Lank stood and walked around the fire. As he stared down at Doll, she avoided looking at him. Instead, she picked up a tree twig and poked about in the ashes until she found a piece of meat that had fallen from the spit. She pulled it out and ate it.

"Why does he smile so?" Lank asked.

Doll looked at Lincoln. The smile that seemed to perpetually light his face was both sweet and terrible. She shook her head. "He sees things that we do not see. He hears the voices of ones we have never known."

"I thank you for saving him."

"I did not. Raymond did. He was the man who came to tell you of Lincoln."

"You healed his wounds."

"I also healed this dog. It is all the same to me."

"I will send you food. You already have my thanks."

"Give me nothing. Take your friend away."

"I cannot take him."

"You mean you *will* not! Because he is Coinless!"

"Murph has mauled him in Randland and made him unclean. He is of no tribe or clan now. It would be better for you if you let him wander where he will."

Doll stared at Lank for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice was low and ripe with an anger edged with a sense of loss. "This man that stands before me, this one both hot and cold? Once he howled his sorrow at hearing of the death of a friend. Now he whispers in the same voice of exile for that friend. No, this one who stands before me is no man. This one before me is a mindless, faithless wind. A wind with no heart and no spine."

"I am a man and a Coiner," Lank protested, "I –"

"You are a betrayer." Doll dropped her head and began to stroke Hound who crouched beside her. She looked up at Lank and brushed back her hair. "He needs you, this one who sits so empty here. Help him."

"If you choose to keep him with you," Lank said, heading for the mouth of the cavern, "you run a risk. He is Murphless and therefore dangerous."

"Go!" Doll screamed and flung the twig at Lank. It struck his leg and the Coins girdling his knee jingled faintly.

He stooped down and left the cavern as Hound rose snarling and Lincoln got up and placed the fur he had been holding around Doll's shaking shoulders.

Several months later, the people crept up to the temple of Murph with looks of dread on their faces and invisible weights hanging about their necks and ankles. In their arms – tribute. In their arms, woven baskets partially filled with apples – green, wrinkled. They carried ropes of onions strung together, salted meats packed in grass, bowls of cold broth in which stringy matter floated lumpily.

They put down their burdens in the courtyard under the gloating eye of Berg who murmured Murph's blessings with his mouth while his mind counted and calculated. Saliva flooded his tongue, drowning his teeth, as he gazed at the tribute. The apples in their baskets were transformed before his eyes into moist morsels packed inside a rich brown crust

of meal. Onions steamed and sent out their pungent breath to spice the air. In Berg's imagination, the cold broth slid down his gullet and landed with a pleasantly cool plop to fill his empty belly.

"Murph thanks the faithful," he declared, as the last person had placed his offering on the high pile. "He has delivered us out of Beforeit and his everywhere eye sees our suffering and is sad. Go now. Go you with Murph."

Eisen appeared from the inner arena in which Murph could be heard muttering and moaning from time to time. He came toward his brother, rubbing the aching, arthritic joints in his ten tortured fingers. "Brother Berg, so much?"

Berg glanced at Eisen with evident irritation. "Better too much than too little. Murph wants his servants to have sufficient flesh on their bones and stamina in their sinews."

"But so much," Eisen repeated, studying the piles of food and bluetree blooms and skins fat with wine which lay piled in the courtyard. "All this would suffice for ten times as many Coiners as now move about Murph. And the people waste away."

"They suffer for their sins. It is only right."

"Next Tribute Day –" Eisen began.

"Next Tribute Day," Berg said, without allowing his brother to finish, "is the time of the maidens. My loins are already ungirded in anticipation."

"I was going to suggest that next Tribute Day be canceled. We have no need of women and our storage spaces are stuffed with provisions. Let the people keep their tribute."

"And let them grow fat and contented on their food and safe in the knowledge that Murph does not lust after their daughters? Ah, Eisen! How poor a servant of Murph you have made. How quickly you forget that contentment is the womb from which disaster springs. Once the people are contented they will no longer live in fear of Murph. Once the people no longer fear Murph they will begin to forget his name and his servants. Then one of them will ask why their half-forgotten god needs acolytes. Then they will rise

up with sticks and sharp stones and we shall be forced to flee or bleed. Murph will fall beneath their hands. Eisen, you who worry so about blasphemy have committed it and yet the folly of your thoughts remains hidden from you."

Eisen lowered his head. He massaged each of his fingers in turn. "It seems wrong to take when we already have more than enough."

Berg put a heavy arm around his brother's shoulder. "We shall Toss." He took his Coin from the folds of his ragged robe. "We shall learn whether the next Tribute Day should be canceled."

"Yes," Eisen said, "a Toss is definitely in order."

Berg tossed his Coin. "Heads to cancel; Tails to maintain."

"Tails!" Eisen whispered a moment later as he examined the Coin resting on the palm of his brother's hand. He puckered his lips and nodded absently as if in answer to a question that he alone had heard asked. "Berg, I have begun to wonder why you scorn my faith and why you speak in holy terms only when there are others about to hear. At other times, you blaspheme. I think you no longer believe, Berg, and the thought wakes me in the long nights." Eisen waved a weary hand as if he had said too much that was of only vague import. He began to move away from his brother.

Berg watched him enter the inner arena of the Temple, feeling a faint touch of alarm and annoyed with himself as he thought about how he had spoken too openly and too rashly to Eisen. He saw, instead of his brother walking away, his enemy. He narrowed his eyes and made his plans as he quietly followed Eisen and watched him prostrate himself before the flashing, clicking face of Murph.

For a time, Eisen lay motionless on the steel floor. For a time, he was silent. And then his words eased up from the lump of himself that lay so weak and hopeless on the floor before his whole world, his only universe.

"I know Beloneit was bad. I know that Beloneit was a

Coinless time and therefore doomed. I know many things but heresy is not among them. Murph, your servant cries out to you. He cries out for wisdom and for faith. Tell this one who bleats before you why it is that the people blessed with Afterit must suffer in unseen winds that blow their very bones away. The people hunger. They thirst. They atone in Randland as their Coins decree but still the face of the land never smiles and everywhere people die."

Silence.

Eisen, as the minutes were born and then died, shifted position. He scratched himself and emitted an asthmatic [illegible]

A faint whirring whispered on the air. Then, a *click-clasp-zing.* The voice of Murph whined into erratic and loud life.

"Ah, the truly Olympian holocaust has come among us at last. Wishing and fearing and hating has brought it a-borning among us. We attacked. They retaliated. Zeus bowed before the murderous nature of man and fled while Apollo touched the sun with his divine fingers and made it melt and flow and fall to sear our flesh and scorch our minds. Artemis would not show her light and Aphrodite died hating. Ares, god of war, awoke and the world writhed under his hot eye and heavy arm. Are you listening to me, you rotten Survives? Do you hear the voice of disaster singing its wild song?"

Lank entered the temple carrying a cloth to clean the face of Murph and fell to his knees under the onslaught of Murph's words, his forehead pressed against the cold steel of the floor.

Eisen clapped his hands over his ears but he could not shut out the words winging about the temple.

"Listen to me, Survives! Poseidon wept and the seas boiled. Hades opened his dark gates and the nations tumbled down past the three wicked heads of Cerberus, all of them smiling at their long-awaited guests. Dionysus drank and reeled drunkenly in the dead streets of the dead cities. Iris gathered up her last rainbow and went away.

blinded. Pan piped but the flocks could no longer heed his call.

"Oh, merciless is the nature of man. Our crimes bloody even the stars. Oh, sweet Christ, I wish I had died in the very heart of the holocaust. Our missile net withered and we were vulnerable. Skilled spiders had spun that web but few of them lived to see it shatter in the nuclear fire. Oh, what is Man that thou are mindful of him?"

Eisen shuddered as the words of Murph dissolved into a scream that shrank into a sob.

There was, for a time, only the sound of the tape spinning. And then, softly sobbing, Murph moaned

"Never again. Never. No. The ruined towns and the burned bodies that lie like charred wood in the streets and meadows shall not be our epitaph. There are those who still walk dazed through the world they had no part in unmaking. Already the best remaining brains – those still-spinning spiders – have named them 'Survives.' Ah, what we have not learned! Survives! Not men! Not women. Not babies with empty eyes and torn ligaments. Not human beings! Survives! I retch in my righteous wrath and I wallow in my guilt like a fakir embracing his bed of nails.

"I will shatter my slide rule and erase my equations and deny my rich sick lore wherein death lurked grinning and I will –

"So many – all of them dead. Jerry. Elaine, who was going to marry Ed Adams next month. Names. Bodies. Eisenberg took his little lever in his hot hand and he stroked it and he stroked it and he had his orgasm and now Elaine has become Death's consort. As have all the faceless others here and there. Ours and theirs. Eisenberg is dead. He found infinity spouting out of his twisted fantasy. But I live and I will – !

"What will I do? If man will not change, I will change him. I will take this microtape and I will engrave upon it [illegible words – words to live by. Survives. I will tell you how it was before it happened and I will teach you how to live

now after it has happened. I, Murph, will guarantee that it will never happen again."

Click-clasp-zing.

"Lank," Berg whispered from his hiding place.

Lank raised his head and looked around. It was not Eisen kneeling beside him who had spoken. Eisen was deep in mumbling devotion.

"Lank!"

Lank got to his feet as he saw Berg step out of the shadows and beckon to him. He stepped carefully around the still-prostrate Eisen and approached Berg.

"You heard Murph?" Berg asked in a low tone.

Lank nodded numbly.

"You heard him decree the death of Eisen?"

Lank started. "I thought Murph said that –"

"He said that Eisen was dead. He said Eisen had found infinity."

"But Eisen lives!" Lank protested, turning to point at the unmoving form lying before the now-silent face of Murph.

"Come outside where we can talk. I have heavy things to say to you."

Lank followed Berg out into the courtyard feeling both puzzled and afraid. The ways of Murph were mysterious, he knew. But how could Murph lie? Berg had said the Murph had declared Eisen dead. But Eisen lived. "I have been a Coiner for too little a time," Lank told Berg, "to understand how Murph could be mistaken."

"He is not mistaken. Murph is never mistaken. Murph said that Eisen is dead. Therefore, Eisen must die."

"I heard – I thought he said that Eisen *and* Berg were dead."

"You heard wrong. We must work the will of Murph."

"What –?"

"Eisen must be Decoined." Berg raised both hands to cover his face and a harsh sound issued from his throat.

Lank put out a hand to touch Berg's shoulder. "Let us go

back and wait. Murph may speak again so that we may understand more clearly. Eisen has committed no crime. For what must he be Decoined?"

Berg lowered his hands and raised his face to the sky. "I cannot question the pain Murph sends to me. We must do what we must do – what Murph would have us do. Will you stand by me in my agony, Lank? Eisen is my only brother."

"I will," Lank replied.

Berg clasped Lank to him as Eisen rose within the temple and shambled toward his cubicle, his hands trembling and his lips pressed tightly together. "Call the Coiners together, Lank," Berg whispered. "We will meet in an hour."

Lank and Berg separated and came together again at the time that Berg had designated. Eisen and the eleven young men sat in a semicircle on the steel floor before the silent Murph. Their heads bowed, their wolfhide loincloths slick with sweat, the coiners waited as Berg stood motionless with his head pressed against the glass behind which Murph hid.

At last, Berg straightened and turned to them. In his hand was one of the cymbals used by the beaters to herd the Losers of a Toss to the dread halls of Randland. He struck it and its brass voice boomed. The Coiners waited apprehensively.

"While you were about your duties," Berg told them, "Murph visited me. One of you was with me at the time – Lank of the Tribe of Five. Together we heard the message of Murph. I, in sorrow; Lank, in fitting wonder."

Surreptitious glances were given Lank by his fellow Coiners. He ignored them, his eyes on Berg

"– and so we must listen again," Berg was saying, "and, hearing, confirm among us what it is that Murph desires – demands."

"I am Jersey," said one of the Coiners, rising to his knees from a squatting position. "I would speak."

A faint trace of annoyance flitted across Berg's solemn

countenance. "This is not the time for questions or instruction."

Undaunted, Jersey said, "Murph speaks when he will. How long must we wait before he speaks?"

"As long as is necessary," Eisen retorted from his place near Jersey. "You have the impatience of the young and untried. Take you care, Coiner."

Berg almost smiled. "We will wait now." He turned away from the assembled Coiners and placed his hands on the face of Murph. He ran them up and down the smooth surface. He moved to the right and then to the left. He moved around Murph, disappearing and then reappearing again. He sat down in front of the Coiners, far from Eisen.

It began minutes later.

Murph spoke.

"*Jerry. Elaine, who was going to marry Ed Adams next month. Names, Bodies. Eisen. . . .*"

Berg struck his cymbal.

"*. . . took his little lever in his hot hand and he stroked it and he stroked it and he had his orgasm and now Elaine [illegible]*."

Berg was on his feet, whirling in what appeared to be ecstasy. He moved closer to Murph and then behind him.

"*. . . Death's consort. As have all the faceless others here [illegible]. . . .*"

The cymbal sounded. Berg shrieked.

"*. . . is dead. He found infinity spouting out of his twisted [illegible]*."

Click-clasp-zing.

Berg reappeared from behind Murph's great and shining bulk. "You heard, Coiners?"

Heads nodded.

"Eisen!" Berg cried, tears brightening his eyes as he pointed at his brother. "You are dead. Murph so states!"

There was a stirring among the Coiners. Only Lank remained in his place, a frown on his face as he watched Eisen.

Eisen got to his feet "But I – I *live*!"

"Murph denies it!" Berg cried out, striking his cymbal. "Call the attendants. Have them prepare for the Decoining of Eisen."

Eisen sputtered briefly and then his shoulders sagged and he began to mumble, making the familiar circle with his left thumb and index finger, holding his right finger erect to create the symbols by which Murph lived. O. 1.

Berg made a visible effort at control. He swept both hands across his face and they came away wet. "Eisen, Eisen," he moaned. "I would that Murph had not so spoken."

Eisen shuffled up to him, his face oddly alight He put a hand on his brother's arm. "Mysterious are the ways of Murph. I await my Decoining in the firm embrace of faith which not even death can unlock." He turned and strode resolutely past the Coiners and out into the courtyard of the temple.

"Lank," Berg said. "Summon the attendants."

Lank rose obediently and went out.

Some minutes later, the attendants came, their necklaces of Coins jingling against their chests as they wheeled the wooden disk into the courtyard and laid it down before the immobile Eisen.

Eisen turned to look one last time at his brother and then laid his old body down upon the symbolic Coin, stretching out his arms and legs as the attendants bent down to him like great shadows to obscure his final sun.

When Eisen was securely tied to the Coin, they rolled it ceremoniously to and up High Hill. Eisen's low moans grew fainter and finally could be heard no more.

Silhouetted against the light bursting from behind the summit of High Hill, the Coin was a dark circle. Eisen, upon it, was invisible. Slowly, the attendants turned the Coin until it was an erect sliver slicing the sky. Slowly, it diminished in size as it spun down carrying Eisen with it. His weak scream ended as the Coin crashed into a ravine.

Berg dropped to his knees, bowed his head, and struck his cymbal. The sound rang in the air. "He was a fine broth of a boy," he cried. "A prince among paupers."

The words of Murph that Berg had just quoted rang in Lank's ears. Sorrow burned within him, a carefully banked fire. He was sorry for Eisen who was now dead or, if not yet dead, dying. Eisen, he thought, was such a puny sacrifice. It seemed to Lank that Murph might better have demanded multitudes instead of the death of one scrawny old man. But Murph was inscrutable and he had his ways. Eisen's scream echoed in Lank's mind, fuel for the fire of sorrow that burned within him. He watched the attendants as they strode down High Hill, their faces impassive and their mouths closed. They came up to Berg who still knelt, faintly moaning, and waited.

"Berg," Lank said softly.

Berg raised his head and motioned to the attendants. They turned and left the courtyard. Berg held up a hand and Lank took it and helped him to his feet.

"Coiners," Berg said, addressing the young men that stood clustered and whispering nearby. "Go and muse on what has just taken place. Seek understanding. Cultivate acceptance of the will of Murph."

When the Coiners had returned to the temple and their cubicles, Berg turned to Lank. "We will speak no more of Eisen," he said. "He is gone and it is as if he had never been."

"Our number grows less," Lank said. "First, Lincoln. Now, Eisen."

"Both must be replaced. We will find someone to take the Loser, Lincoln's place among the Coiners. And yours."

"Mine?"

Berg's face softened as he stared at Lank standing beside him. "Someone must succeed Eisen."

Was Berg saying –? Did Berg mean that he, Lank would –?

"You read the tapes with true instinct and sound in-

tuition, Lank. You understand Murph's messages. You know that what is must be and that what Murph decrees is just. Lank, you are more than fit to take our brother's place in the service of Murph and Coindom."

"No," Lank protested, shaking his head. "Not I. I have been a Coiner but a short time. It would be unwise. Murph would not look kindly on such a choice. On one so unworthy."

"Lank, Lank do not be afraid. I know that your voice is that of a fearful boy and not one merely humble. Remember that I have served Murph since leaving the corral as have my ancestors all through the countless sets of seasons. Like my brother, I display the burden of blood guilt here on my forehead for all to see. U238 – the mystic message that was our male progenitor's undoing. Before me – before me and Eisen – there were the others. Eisenberg One. Eisenberg Two – all of them, down through unmeasured times. Ei. Sen. Berg. So many."

"But I am not of your blood."

"That is so. But I have not yet fathered children. Until I do, the task is yours – if you have the faith and the courage to share it with me."

"A Toss?"

Berg suppressed the sense of impatience that briefly sparked in his eyes. "A Toss then. Ah, how true are your instincts." Berg took his Coin and held it on his bent thumb. "Tails will declare you Eisen's successor." He Tossed.

Lank's head jerked up and then down, following the glinting flight of the Coin as it spun through the air.

"*Tails!*" Berg cried exultantly.

Lank's breath that he had been holding with no awareness of the pain it caused in his chest, rushed out in a sudden blast. "So be it," he said.

Berg embraced him. "Together we will walk, Lank, you and I. Together will we cultivate rich fields for Murph to roam in. Together we will cry aloud the truth of Coin-[illegible]!"

Lank, when Berg released him, said, "I will go away for a while. I would be alone."

"Go then, Lank. And when you return, you will return to –"

"To Murph."

"To Murph, yes. And to the favors that Murph bestows on those who serve him." Berg spoke sharply to a young girl of no more than fourteen who was hurrying past the entrance to the temple. "See this man," Berg said when the girl came to stand silently beside him. "This man is no more a mere Coiner but one who stands beside me in the service of Murph. He will return soon and when he does, come to him and bring two of your sisters after all of you have washed yourselves and smeared your bodies with the sap of the young baybushes. All of you will come to his new cubicle in the inner chamber and all of you will come prepared to please this one who now, with me, maintains Murph."

"I will be back soon," Lank said and sprinted from the courtyard.

He ran without seeing the landscape through which he raced. The sun was high in the sky and its warm touch released sweat that ran slickly down his skin. When he was far from the temple, past High Hill and beyond Lost Valley, he shouted his joy to the winds which gave him no answer. He bellowed and flailed his arms in an ecstasy of elation. He leaped and seized a low-hanging branch of a scarred tree and swung back and forth like a lean pendulum.

"I am Lank, once a Coiner, now a king with no crown but a kingdom rich in Coins and other marvels!" he cried aloud. "Look you sun and sky at Lank and be glad with him!"

He dropped from the tree and sprawled in a happy heap, laughing and crying. He seized a handful of dirt and tossed it above his head and ran away before it fell. For an hour, he raced through areas he had never visited before. At last, exhausted, he dropped down on a bed of gray moss and

only then realized that he was back beside the waterfall where he had often frolicked as a boy. He was hot and his thirst was immense. He dragged himself to the edge of the stream and lapped water eagerly. When he was at last sated, he withdrew and stared down at the ripples he had made and watched them eddy out and away. When the water returned to a relative calmness, he studied his face reflected in it and saw a majesty he had never dreamed existed. He threw back his head and shouted his name to the silent wilderness, over and over again. Faint echoes returned, sonic balls thrown by invisible hands. *Laaannnkkk!*

He stripped off his wolfhide loincloth, intending to slide down the slope of stone as he had done so many other times. But something deterred him. He told himself the water was too cold. But he knew it was not. He lay down again, thinking of the most recent time he had slid down the slope with –

He closed his eyes and was soon asleep. He wandered in his dreamscape, past tall trees and mountains covered with Coins. He came to a dark building and narrowed his eyes to make out the flickering lights within that screamed out to him for help. He was about to flee from the unknown horror within when he heard the smashing sound that came from the center of the building before him. And then he made out the figure of Doll moving frenzied before the flickering lights as she smashed them gleefully. *She was destroying Murph!* He called her name, warned her, threatened her. She neither turned nor answered. One by one, under her onslaught, the red and blue and yellow lights shut their electric eyes and Doll at last turned around and saw him and came toward him, her bloodied hand raised and he found he could not move, could not cry out, and he saw her hand falling toward the gleaming lights of his own eyes and then there was only blackness everywhere.

CHAPTER THREE

Doll sat near the entrance to her cavern, Hound beside her, Lincoln somewhere behind them both, crooning to himself as he crushed berries and fruit to make the paints he needed.

Outside, rain washed the world.

Doll stared through the undulating sheets of water that shivered down upon the trees and turned the earth to thick mud. She saw neither the rain nor the world. She thought of what she must do about Lincoln. Lank had been right Lincoln was dangerous because he was Coinless. The thought made her reach up to the cavity of her ear and touch the cold surface of her own Coin. Although it was there and although it could be Tossed at any time, Doll knew that she was, in her heart, as Coinless as the demented creature that moved about behind her as he painted his stories of joy and fear on the walls of her cavern.

She put her arms around her knees and hugged them to her. Hound stirred with her movement and looked up at her. Seeing that she was not going to leave, he lowered his head to his paws and half closed both of his eyes.

Doll had learned a little about Lincoln in the days he had been with her. She knew that his skin had healed and was again the whole garment in which he lived. She knew that his wounds were inside somewhere, invisible but raw. He had told her, without knowing what he was telling her, something of himself. He had been born among the women and he only vaguely remembered a man who had sometimes come with small gifts and loud laughter to one fat woman in particular whom he described as the one who cared most for him and who might have been his mother. The man was robust and shaggy and Lincoln remembered

once having been held high above the man's head and allowed to jiggle there while the man's hard hands had held him firmly and his eyes had looked up with mirth into his own. He could not remember the man's name and he said that the man came no more to the group of women and the other children after the day that the wild dogs had overtaken the fat woman despite the screams of the other women and their desperate throwing of stones and heavy sticks. After the death of the fat woman, he lived in the corral. He could not hunt as well as the other boys. But that was because he had no guile. He could not stalk, half-hidden in the baybushes, while the small animals sniffed the air and did not know that danger came on two legs and death was the name of the stone that flew from a leather sling. Lincoln would stumble or step on a branch that would warn the beasts or he would forget the business he was about with the other boys and stand up at the wrong moment to stare in wonder and a huge delight at the wet noses of the stunted deer and drown himself in their moist and melting eyes. The other boys called him names and, to avoid the names, he walked by himself more and more often. He would have starved, he said, but he had learned to sing songs and dance dances for which the indulgent elders of the Copper Clan gave him morsels of food and pots full of hot broth. His services, such as they were, were not required but were found to be occasionally amusing. He survived. And at last, painfully lonely, he turned his thoughts to the mystic and the sublime. Murph dawned in his ten-year-old sky and from then on he feared neither the Place of Pits nor himself. He made his way through the world of Afterit no longer so alone and became, in time, a Coiner.

And now, Doll thought, you have become Coinless and no one will call you names. They will, instead, kill you. What good is Murph to you now? What hope have you of life, now that Randland has failed to destroy you and no Coin anywhere protects you?

The rain lessened and gave way to a gently spraying mist.

A ragged bird appeared on a bare branch and chirped a few tentative notes before shaking itself in feathered chagrin and flying off to a dream of dry places.

Hound yawned noisily.

Doll scratched his forehead and he rolled over on his back. She let her hand rest on his hairy rib cage and found herself counting the beats of the dog's throbbing heart. Life was everywhere. She could not believe in death – would not.

Throb, thump. Throb, thump. Hound's heart sent out its secret messages and Doll listened to them as the rain went away and the branches dripped and clouds split into uneven parcels of gray foam to permit the sun to see what had happened in its absence.

She got up and walked back into the cavern to where Lincoln crouched, intent upon his work. She stared at his hand that moved like a fish in rushing water as it dipped the brush made from hair torn from Hound's tail into the dried gourds where the juices of the crushed berries and fruits lay red and orange and ebony.

"Doll is she," Lincoln sang softly. "She is Doll, aliee, alooo. Dolleee, Dolooo. My Doll, she "

He put a white finger into red juice and then rubbed the stain into the outline of the figure he had carved with Doll's stone knife into the cavern wall. It was the figure of a hunter. The man's right arm was raised and the sling it held seemed to whirl about his head. A brown patch showed where his wolfhide loincloth was. Beneath that bright blur, his strong legs were planted firmly apart.

"What does he hunt?" Doll asked.

Lincoln looked up at her and smiled. He did not answer but instead quickly cleaned his makeshift brush and painted a yellow ball just above and to the right of the man's upraised arm.

"I see," Doll said "He hunts the sun."

"His name is Nandan."

Doll thought the figure looked like Lank. She studied the

other figures Lincoln had painted on the wall. Some were distorted and woke fear in her. Others were smiling in thin long lines, their hands clasped and their feet thrust out at all angles, their bodies tilted – dancing.

"Lincoln," Doll said.

"He will catch it. Noman will bring down the sun and never again be cold."

"Lincoln," Doll repeated firmly. "I must take you back to the Copper Clan."

"Someday."

"Today. Now."

"But Noman's hunting is not yet ended."

"Now. Come, Lincoln."

He put down his gourds and brush and stood up. He followed Doll to the cavern entrance but hesitated as she went outside.

Hound woke and got to his feet. He shook himself, prepared to hunt goats or merely gambol as Doll directed.

"Stay here, Hound," she ordered. The dog whined but obeyed, lying down at the mouth of the cavern. "Come, Lincoln."

He glanced over his shoulder at the colorful wall of the cavern and then sighed and went outside after her.

Doll walked a few paces ahead, her stride brisk and purposeful. It took them the better part of an hour to reach the enclosure the Copper Clan had built to protect its members. The fence rose more than eight feet in the air and the individual branches that composed it were bound together by strips of sinew that had been dried and carefully cured. Set at random among the sticks were shafts of pointed stone. The top of each stick had been carefully pared to a sharp point which had then been coated with the sap of a species of poisonous Afterit plant.

Doll stopped some distance from the enclosure. Soon, as she had expected, a whistle went up from the watchtower atop one corner of the enclosure.

Moments later, heads appeared above the pointed sticks.

Stones flew from countless hands. Doll ducked and dodged, keeping Lincoln behind her in order to shield him from the missiles.

"Stop!" she shouted. "I bring you one of your own. I am Doll!"

The stones no longer flew. Most of the angry heads disappeared.

"Raymond!" she yelled. "Tell those fools inside that they need have no fear of me. Not this day, at least." She smiled grimly, pleased at her last statement which gave her a sense of pride and stature.

Minutes later, the gate creaked open and Raymond appeared. "Doll," he said, holding wide his arms.

But Doll saw the uneasiness on his face. She saw him standing too rigidly, not in the relaxed way one welcomes a friend. "I bring you your sister's son, Raymond. Take him."

Raymond gestured and the men behind him began to close the gate. He moved toward Doll and Lincoln.

When he had come up to them, Doll said nothing She merely stepped aside and let him see Lincoln.

"Doll, I cannot. He is unclean. Coinless."

"Then stand him naked in the next rain. Give him a Coin. He is one of you."

Raymond lowered his head and then raised it wearily. "They will not permit it. They are afraid of one who should have died in Randland." He paused and then looked directly into Doll's face. "They will let you return if you admit to error. You Lost but survived. Lincoln was dead in Randland but some force opposed to Murph moved him out of his fate. He walks like the living but he is dead. For you, Doll, it is different."

Doll spat at Raymond's feet. "Murph! Murph is the one who has eaten all your hearts and snapped your spines! Raymond, listen to me!"

Doll made an effort to speak softly. She unclenched her fists and drew a deep breath. "I cannot provide for myself

and this boy as well. I am a woman, Raymond, and the hunting is hard. This boy of your blood is hurt and needs the protection the Clan can give. Raise your voice in the Council and speak of his need."

Raymond opened his mouth, but no words came.

"Raymond, I ask only for *him*."

"Come, Doll. I will call a Council and we shall Toss – if I can convince them to do so."

Doll moved toward the enclosure, following Raymond. She had not gone more then a few feet when she realized that Lincoln was not behind her. She turned and looked back. She called Lincoln's name. He did not move. She went back and took his hand and led him toward the enclosure. She felt the moisture from his palm slippery on her own.

As they approached the closed gate, Doll noticed that it was not the gate she remembered from her days among the Clan. This gate was sturdier, stronger-looking. As it swung slowly open, Raymond preceded her into the compound. Doll tightened her grip on Lincoln's hand and then moved after Raymond as she entered a world that was once hers, before it had cast her out as the penalty for her willfullness. When the gate slammed shut behind her, she felt a sense of panic seize her. She halted. With the closing of the gate, she felt trapped. The thought both amazed and amused her as she considered it. Once, years earlier, the closing of the gate had meant safety to her and all the others sheltering behind it. But now – now its closing meant to her that the wide world beyond it was cut off from her. Freedom was shut out so that security might reign in the circumscribed area bounded by the tall fence. Her sense of panic gave way to a feeling of sadness as she realized that such uneasy bartering was, in a way she could only sense, ultimately doomed.

They walked to the thatched shelter where the Elders of the Clan lived and ruled, passing the mounds that surmounted the holes hollowed out of the earth in which the Clan members dwelled. Etched with sticks in the dry mud of the

mounds were the outlines of the bearded man that was the totem of the Copper Clan. The more imaginative Clansmen had placed bits of broken glass in the figure to represent his all-seeing eyes. Others had set marsh grasses in the mud to simulate his short beard and hair. Some had drawn designs in the mud to the right of the totem face. 1964. 1961. The sight brought a brief pang of remorse to Doll *Home.* No! Home was out on the plains where the wild dogs bayed. Home for her was her cavern and High Hill and Lost Valley. Home for her was everywhere – and nowhere.

The people crawled up out of their shelters to stare and whisper. "The rebel girl. . . . She questioned Coindom. . . . The one with her . . . Randland. . . . Raymond runs a risk . . ."

Raymond stopped before the shelter of the Elders. He put out his staff and knocked briskly on the molded plaque hanging to the right of the entrance on which was drawn the pillared building and the words that no one now understood: ONE CENT.

A man even older than Raymond poked his hairless head out the shrouded doorway. "Well, Raymond?"

"I would call a Council."

The old man rubbed his eyes. "This day is more than a moon from that on which the Council sits. Go away, Raymond."

The man started to withdraw. Raymond placed his staff beneath the cloth covering the man was trying to lower over the opening.

He said, "This is a major matter. It is urgent. You see before you the son of my sister who –"

The man, obviously irritated, rubbed his eyes again and peered past Raymond "I see no son of your sister. Lincoln of the Copper Clan died in Randland."

"Randland released him as you well know, Perth. This girl who was once one of us has returned him to us."

"Our shelters do not house the dead, Raymond. You know that."

Doll seized Raymond's arm. "Perth is half blind. His eyes see as little as does his mind. Make him listen to you!"

At that moment, a thin cry slid out of the gathered crowd. A woman – the one who had cried out – moved uneasily toward Lincoln who was standing quietly beside Doll, his hand still clasped in hers. He watched as the woman, crouching, moved closer to him. She seemed about to bolt and he seemed to sense her impulse. He remained motionless.

The woman reached out a finger, her shoulders hunched as if to shield herself from a blow she was expecting. But before she could touch Lincoln, Raymond moved quickly and shoved her back into the crowd.

"Stay away, Missy."

"But he is mine," Missy moaned. "He grew big in my belly. You yourself pulled him from me and cut the cord that bound us together. Lincoln!"

Raymond raised his staff in warning and Missy shrank back, clawing at her lips and calling out to Murph to aid her.

Raymond brushed past Perth and entered the Council chamber. He beckoned to Doll who promptly led Lincoln through the doorway.

After considerable argument, Raymond convinced the other four members of the Council that they must Toss in order to determine whether or not Lincoln might remain among them.

Doll took up a position near the doorway as the Coins were brought to the Elders and unwrapped. The greasy cloth in which they had lain was set aside and the Elders, Raymond among them, took up their appointed positions at the five points of the stone star that was formed by bars of rusted metal set in the dirt floor of the shelter.

"By the five points of the stone star," Raymond intoned, "we shall Toss. Praise Pentagons. As it was Beforeit, is not now and never shall ever be again! I call on all the ancient inhabitants of the stone star to steer our Coins and give us

no more Pentagons so that Afterit shall endure." Raymond glanced at his colleagues. They met his eyes All Tossed.

"*Heads he stays; tails he goes!*" shouted Perth as the Coins began their journeys.

Doll watched.

Perth's Coin fell to the ground. The others caught theirs. Raymond called for another Toss since this one was invalidated by Perth's error.

"A bad omen," Perth muttered ominously.

The woman who had tried to touch Lincoln eased inside the shelter. She sidled up to Doll. "Lincoln is not dead," she whispered. "Even Randland could not destroy that one." The woman stared at Doll. "You were with us once?"

Doll nodded. "A long time ago."

"You were the one who was to mate with young Trust?"

"I am the one."

"He is dead."

Doll stiffened. "Trust is dead?"

"Contaminated. The Elders took him to Murph but it did no good. They made him swallow six Coppers but it did no good. He died."

The image of the lithe and laughing Trust whom Doll had loved and lusted for that one brief summer before she had been banished flashed in the lost land behind her eyes and then dissolved in shimmering water.

"Have you taken my Lincoln to you instead?" the woman asked.

Doll shook her head.

The Coins were again in the air.

"*Tails!*" Perth declared, triumphantly.

"No!" the woman screamed and threw her arms around Lincoln's neck. "He is mine – ours! He is of our Clan! Randland has no need of him!" She began to weep.

Lincoln began to lead her in an erratic series of steps that was not quite a dance "Heads," he sang. "Tails," he whispered The woman shook herself free of him and turned to

confront Raymond and the other Elders. A knife appeared from beneath the low girdle she wore. Her naked breasts heaved with her heavy breathing. "Randland took him from me once. You will not now!"

She sprang as the Elders moved toward her. They were old. She was strong. There were five of them. She was but one. When they had her on the ground and had gagged her so that she could scream no more, they called to the young men outside. The men entered, scooped up her frail flesh and waited.

"Take her to Berg," Perth ordered. "Tell him that she attempted to deny the result of a Toss. Tell him to Decoin her."

Before the young men could carry the struggling woman from the shelter, Lincoln swooped down like a graceful bird and kissed her cheek.

"Doll," Raymond said sadly. "The Toss –"

Doll saw not Raymond standing forlorn beside her but a younger man – Trust. This, she thought, is what Trust would have become in time – an old man, a man who trembles and whose will is as weak as his creaking limbs. She was almost glad that Trust was dead.

"Doll?"

She turned and stooped and left the shelter and began to run through the maze of mounds, past people who pointed fingers at her and tried to remember her name and she fell against the gate that had closed behind the men carrying Lincoln's mother to her Decoining. She pounded on the gate until her fists were numb and her knuckles bleeding.

Someone behind her shouted an order. Raymond? She did not care. The gate flew open. She began to run from the enclave that imprisoned the Copper Clan.

Lincoln's sudden scream spun her around.

She saw the Clan members strike him. She saw him fall and try to rise. She ran back the way she had come, stopping as she did so only long enough to pick up a fallen tree limb with which she flailed and struck as she leaped among the startled Clansmen and women. They fell back

before her fury and she dragged Lincoln to his feet and pulled him after her as she hurried through the gate a second time.

His blood bathed her as he leaned against her shoulder, one arm thrown about her waist.

From the watchtowers they shouted at her, brandishing fists and making obscene gestures. She did not look back nor did she reply.

When they were more than a mile from the enclosure, she let Lincoln drop to the ground. "I wish you had died in Randland!" she screamed at him, her tears hot on her cheeks. She drew back a foot and kicked him viciously. "Go back to Randland where you belong! Die!" She turned and ran from him and didn't stop until she reached her cavern. Hound bounded out to greet her and she struck the dog a hard blow on the muzzle and he withdrew from her, whimpering. She threw herself down on the pile of furs and beat her fists soundlessly against them. When Hound found the courage to come near her again, he discovered that she was asleep. He circled her. He lay down. He got up. He whined softly.

When Lincoln fell heavily outside the cavern an hour later, Hound went outside and sniffed about his unmoving body. Danger? He loped back inside and pawed at Doll. She sprang up in terror, tossing her hair away from her face. Hound edged nervously away. He trotted outside and then back in again. Doll got up and followed him.

When she saw Lincoln lying unconscious on the ground, she lowered her face to her hands and began to weep for him and for the innocent dog she now remembered striking and for the Clansmen who were so sick with fear and anger against one of their wounded own. When her weeping ended, she dragged Lincoln's limp body into the cavern and mechanically began to wash his wounds, refusing to think about the next day or even the next hour.

The water in the stone vessel grew pink and then rubine as Doll dipped the piece of bloody bark in it. Lincoln

opened his eyes and at first there was only fear in them. But the fear gave way to concern as he looked up at Doll's impassive face. He raised himself on one elbow and looked about the cavern. When his eyes fell upon the figure of Noman, he nodded to himself. And then, "Winner? Where?"

Doll pointed outside.

"Winner!" Lincoln called weakly.

"Hound!" Doll shouted.

The dog came bounding into the cavern, his great tongue flopping about in his open mouth. He bent down over Lincoln, snuffling and snorting. Lincoln pulled the dog's shaggy head down onto his chest. Hound, thinking that Lincoln was challenging him to some strange game, pulled back and then sprang.

"Down, Hound!" Doll cried.

"No," Lincoln said, "he means me no harm."

Doll watched the two of them wrestle. Hound's low growls which were the audible signs of his pleasure blended with Lincoln's low laughter. Despite herself, she felt pleased and unable any longer to nourish the hatred she had tried in vain to cultivate for Lincoln who was a burden she would rather not bear but one she could not, for reasons she did not understand, put from her. Lincoln and the dog were like children in the corral – playful and unaware that the world was full of danger and little delight. She had taken them both in, Doll thought, and she was – Only a little sorry, she admitted to herself. When Hound had first come to her cavern, she had intended to drive him away. But she soon realized she could not. She knew now that she had cured the dog not so much to save his life as to make her own less lonely. And now this other wounded one had come to her and the boundaries of her life had been stretched. She looked at Lincoln and, for the first time, let herself see how handsome he was. His lean limbs and fair hair were pleasant to see. His eyes, though fixed on vistas she could not imagine, remained bright and in them was a soft-

ness she remembered from another time and another place. . . .

His name had been Trust.

His name had been taken from a Coin. He had been easily moved to laughter and as easily to anger. His face was a steadily shifting sky where clouds gathered and dispersed, where sweat like warm rain gathered following the running down of a rat pack, where the black stars of his eyes gleamed and where glacial ice glittered when the sun of his now and then rage rose within it.

And he was dead. Or so had claimed the woman who had mothered Lincoln and was even now perhaps unlifed herself.

So much, lost!

Trust, Doll thought. And the child that I was.

Trust had taken that now-vanished child by the hand and led her into exotic lands where the joining of two bodies was sweeter than the taste of cold water in midsummer and wilder than the tearing teeth of the wild dogs who ranged throughout the world of Afterit like a snarling scourge. He had taken innocence from her and given her in exchange the anguish and glorious delirium of love. He was her waking dream and he had spoken often to her of forever.

"We will have the biggest shelter the Clan has ever seen. High it will be and I will bring flowers from beside the sea to plant beside it. The Clan will look upon us and lament that our riches are not theirs."

"You have never seen the sea," she reminded him.

He drew himself up and inflated his chest and stared out beyond the Place of Pits. "But it is there."

"How do you know?"

"I know. I have heard tales told of it."

"I don't believe it. There is no sea The people believe there is just as they believe that Murph protects them."

He frowned. "Watch your words, girl."

"But Trust, there is no proof of either!"

"The sea exists!"

"And Murph protects us. Yet only yesterday, wild dogs

broke into the corral and carried off two of the children."

"The sea is there – somewhere," he insisted.

"I don't believe it!" she protested, oddly disturbed.

That was one of the beginnings of the end that was not yet near for her. Questions. Denials. A yearning and a sense of guilt over her otherness. The members of the Clan went about their daily business with no hope and no sense of loss. Why couldn't she? Questions were the beginning Her exile from the Clan was the middle. Now she was alone – no, not alone. Now she was with Hound and with Lincoln and she knew that her courage might one day desert her. Her need for the dog and for Lincoln hinted at that potential fact.

If she could not quite believe in the existence of the sea, how could she believe in Trust's death? Did the woman's naming it make it so? Was it really possible that he would not appear one day at the entrance to the cavern and call her name and chide her again, as all the others had always done, for her rebelliousness? Would he not appear to her one day striding down High Hill, singing and skipping, perhaps with bluetree flowers in his hair? No, she knew he would not. Perhaps he had been right. Perhaps the sea did exist. But he did not. Not any longer. No more would his hands excite her thighs or his warm, wet lips cause the nipples on her breasts to rise erect and eager. So this then was life – a letting go, a sad chronicle of loss. As the sets of seasons passed, life altered and shadows one had held to oneself so briefly were swallowed up in a vaster darkness that ate lives as easily as shadows.

She rocked back and forth where she sat, unaware of the steady stares of Hound and Lincoln. Her eyes were open but they saw only secrets.

Lincoln whispered her name. When she did not respond, he reached out and shook her.

She ripped her arm free of his grasp.

"Doll! There – look!"

She turned swiftly and became aware of the shadow

that had just now fallen upon her feet. Its owner stood in the cavern's mouth, silhouetted there, faceless with the sun at his back, a partially invisible visitor.

The trip-trap, Doll thought. It will snare him if he comes toward us. "Who?" she called out, aware that her voice was [illegible].

"You are the one called Doll?" the faceless man asked.

"Who needs to know?"

"I bring a message from Lank of the Tribe of Five."

"We slid," Lincoln murmured to himself. "I caught a [illegible]."

"Quiet!" Doll commanded. "This dog can kill," she told the man whose face she could not see.

"Lank sends you these," the man said.

A half-seen movement in the gloom indicated to Doll that the man was holding out his hands to her. She got up and warily approached the stranger, Hound beside her, her hand buried in the animal's thick pelt to restrain him. She went past the man, keeping her eyes on him, turning as she moved, until she stood outside and felt the warm mantle of the sun come to rest on her shoulders. "Come out here."

The man moved out of the shadows. In his hand was a heavy skin. "This is meal," he said, "from which you can bake bread. These," he said, indicating the handful of gleaming objects that Doll could not quite discern from where she stood, "are for barter with the Clans."

Doll stepped forward and pointed to the ground. The man dropped the bag of grain at her feet. She held out her hand and he poured the gleaming bits of glass into it.

Lincoln appeared beside Doll and took her hand in his own. He took the treasure from her hand and went back and sat down beside the undergrowth that bordered the cavern.

"Lank wishes you well," the man said, "He now serves Murph at the side of Berg whose brother was Decoined, and thinks he therefore that others are fit only to run his errands."

"Eisen? Decoined?"

"There was talk among the Coiners of sacrifice."

"Murph now murders?"

The man stiffened. "I am Jersey, a Coiner. I obey Lank and Berg but obedience does not demand that I listen to lies."

"Go then."

"Lank says that you are not to come to him but –"

Doll let out a shrill cry and clapped her hands together. Her face was a mask of mockery.

Undaunted, Jersey continued. "You are not to come to him but he will visit you when the time is right and if he is able. Meanwhile, he wishes you good health and good hunting. And –" Jersey hesitated, watching Doll's narrowed eyes.

"And –? Go on, Jersey. Tell it all."

"He sends love to the boy he thought of as his brother before –"

"Before Murph in Randland unbrothered him, is it not so?"

"That is all."

"It is enough. Tell him that his gifts will not buy from me what he himself has refused to give."

"I do not understand."

"Lank gives gifts because he is afraid to follow where his heart leads him. Tell him Doll so says."

"Doll!"

She turned swiftly at the sound of Lincoln's call. So did Jersey. She went to where Lincoln was kneeling and stared down at the dirt in front of him. He had drawn the crude outline of a face – her face – in the dry dust. He had placed the melted droplets of stained glass from Beforeit in a net to form her long hair. Two bright blue globules formed the pupils of her eyes.

He looked up at her, pleased, smiling, and pointed to his handiwork. "Doll," he said. "See how she shines!"

Lank lay in his cubicle, turning first this way, then that. But sleep firmly refused to share the darkness with him. He lay curled up to contain the warmth his own body generated, conscious of the mingled odor of his own flesh and the scent of the flowers the three girls had brought with them when they had come anointed and naked to him several hours earlier. In the distance, beyond the confines of his cubicle, he heard Murph murmuring. "*When Irish eyes are smiling – WATCH OUT!*" The girls had been a many-limbed puzzle he was not quite sure he had correctly deciphered. They had seemed willing – more than that – eager. They had rolled beneath him and their fingers – all thirty of them – had explored his body expertly. He had bounced and writhed among them and forgotten at times who he was or that there was another world outside the crowded darkness. The girls silently crept at last from his cubicle, weary, carrying within themselves – within each of their selves – portions of Lank's hot erupted substance and he could not help feeling that the meeting and the mating that had just taken place had been a foreign exchange that somehow left him something less than he had been. He did not know their names; he had not seen their faces.

He curled up and tucked his fists under his chin.

"*When Jewish eyes are smiling,*" sang Murph, "*all the world turns sere and gray. And when Jewish eyes are SMILing, then they steal your lives a-WAAYYY!*"

Lank crept out of his cubicle and edged up to the fire burning in the bowl before the face of Murph. He crouched there, listening.

"*Eisenberg, you did it. I did it. I did it because I was under orders. We did it. You and I, bad buddy, we weren't a romantic bleeding heart of an Irishman or a thin Jew with pain where his heart should be. We were good Germans, both of us. If President Lear had survived, we'd be knee deep in the bloody red Rose Garden now sticking out our oh-so-manly-chests to get well-deserved medals pinned on so that we could strut like peacocks over the graves and*

through the cemeteries. 'See,' we'd explain to the dead, 'we had our orders. That's all there was to it really. Don't complain. We're priests, are we, and our orders exorcise you. Lie quiet. Lie easy. Haven't we made the world safe for cemeteries?'"

Lank understood few of Murph's whirling words. What was an Irish? A Jew? Who was Rose Garden and who had bloodied him or it or her? He shuddered and the movement broke the barrier of his lips.

He said, "Murph, I mean to serve you well even though my forehead bears no tattoo and my blood is not the blood of your first disciple, Eisenberg I–"

"I can't keep these damned tapes straight. It's the fever. One hundred and four today. Never gets down below a hundred. But I've got to keep going. Maybe I should try tossing a coin. This tape – I think it's this one – is for the Rand continuity series. Or – Oh, Holy Virgin, I'll never last [illegible]"

Murph spoke no more to Lank. The silence in the temple lay icy on the steel floor and crept along the walls. Lank stared thoughtfully at the face of Murph. Was it possible that the housing – Berg had once referred to it as the housing – was not Murph? Was it possible that Murph was only the voice and his corporeality either did not exist or was hidden behind the gleaming surface of the housing? The questions troubled him. Perhaps an understanding of subtleties was of no real importance. Perhaps only awe was important. Lank shrugged and crawled back into his cubicle to court sleep, that elusive harlot.

In the morning, as he bathed in the sluggish stream not far from the temple, Jersey came to him.

Lank shook the water from his hair and rubbed his eyes.

"What say you, Jersey? You saw her?"

Jersey nodded. "She rejected your gifts. Lincoln played with the pieces of bartering glass you sent."

"Played?"

"He made a face in the dirt and decorated it."

"He has forgotten the value of the Beforeit relics. How did he look?"

"Hurt. There was dried blood on his shoulder and on his jaw."

"Doll –?"

Jersey shook his head. "She seemed tender toward him. No, I do not think it was she who hurt him."

"What did she say of me?"

"Lank gives gifts because he is afraid to follow where his heart leads him," Jersey quoted.

Lank fastened his wolfhide loincloth about his body, his face dark. "The talk of a woman. If every man followed where his heart led –" He hesitated. "Fools follow such a path. Wise men move with more care about the world."

Jersey was silent.

"I took her," Lank mused. "The first time I met her. It was at the Place of Pits. She tried to kill me. She did not Toss She tried to kill me."

"They say she was once of Lincoln's Clan. I have seen her alone on High Hill where the goats gather. She hunts them."

Lank laughed. "Perhaps her heart leads her among them."

"Perhaps," Jersey said, missing the point.

They walked back to the temple to find the Coiners seated in a semicircle in the courtyard. Lank noticed that there was now a twelfth member of their group. The boy was young and his face was radiant beneath the grime that marred it. He watched as Berg moved back and forth in front of the assemblage and he seemed to grow more restless with every word Berg uttered.

"We know that Beforeit was bad. Those of us who have endured Randland know it. It was the ancient Eisenberg who created Beforeit." Berg bowed his head and was silent for a time. "Murph has given us Afterit and we must jealously guard it against the day when those among us may deem it equally evil and seek to return to the old ways, the

ways of Beforeit, when Murph shall be toppled from his height and our hearts shall grow black with another long night."

Berg gestured when he saw Lank. Lank moved forward and came to stand beside Berg. Berg put his arm on Lank's shoulder. "With the death of our brother, Eisen," he intoned, "Lank is now elevated to a position beside me in the service of Murph. Trust him as you trust me – and Murph." Berg waved the Coiners away.

When they had gone, he said to Lank, "Was it you moving about Murph in the night?"

"It was I."

"The girls were sluggish?"

Lank shook his head. "Too eager, if anything." He laughed.

"Come," Berg said. "There are things that you should know about. Come inside."

Lank followed Berg into the temple and was about to sit down when Berg shook his head, indicating to him that he was to follow him as he stepped to the left of Murph and then disappeared from sight.

Lank moved slowly forward, fearful and uneasy.

"Lank!"

Lank moved more swiftly at Berg's summons and, when he had arrived at the place where Berg stood waiting for him, he opened his mouth to speak but Berg silenced him with a peremptory gesture. "Take this key. It was once Eisen's. Use it to open the door you see before you behind which lies the very heart of Murph. I will show you how to maintain him."

Trembling, Lank unlocked the door and they stepped inside the small rear room.

Berg pointed to a series of switches and dials. He told Lank how to manipulate them to produce Murph's voice. He showed him how the tapes were stored and how the reels should be placed. He explained the rewind mechanism. He opened a cabinet and showed Lank the replace-

ment bulbs, the transistorized circuit boards and the lubricants. "These are your responsibilities now," he told Lank. "Yours and mine. I will watch as you service Murph the first few times but I know that you will quickly master the correct techniques. A mind as rapid as yours and a heart that is dedicated will –"

"That opening up there," Lank said, unaware that he was interrupting Berg. He pointed at the small dome and the thick glass composing it. "What –?"

"Murph feeds on the sun," was Berg's cryptic reply.

"Then he is not self-sustaining?"

"As son of the sun, he is."

"But I thought Murph spoke only when he would. You said that we must insert the sources of his voice – the tapes?"

"Our meager assistance in no way diminishes the majesty of Murph. Why look you so troubled, Lank?"

Lank quickly shook his head. "No, not troubled. It is just that I thought –"

"Thought – even the thought of Coiners – is imperfect. There are things they do not and should not know. The people know less. That is as Murph wills it. The less they know, the more willing they are to accept the miracle that is, in clear reality, Murph. Do you understand?"

"I think so. It is just that –"

Berg smiled. "I know, I know. It was the same for me. When I took over the maintenance of Murph with Eisen – Ah, so many years ago. In those days, I was a dewy-eyed boy and at first I was disappointed. The reality of Murph seemed less than the majesty I imagined but Eisen 14 and Berg 11 taught me – taught us – that to be a part of a miracle made the miracle in no way less a miracle. And so will it be for you. Do not let your humility and your wonder unman you, Lank."

They spent the next hour practising the insertion of the tapes that held Murph's invisible voice on their slick surfaces. They oiled Murph and checked his colorful circuitry.

Lank's original dismay gave way slowly to a secret exultation that was not unlike the feeling he had had when he had drunk too much of the liquor distilled from the fermented marsh grasses. An exhilaration pulsed within him and, gradually, his fear at being so close to Murph and to Murph's secrets dissipated and left him a thrilling sense of being someone very special.

For the first time, he dared to be glad that Eisen was dead. He speculated that it might have been Murph's purpose to Decoin Eisen in order that he – Lank – take his place. He was, after all, younger. Stronger. The years that lay ahead of him were more numerous than those that had been left to the aged Eisen. Yes, it seemed that Murph did indeed move in mysterious ways as Berg had insisted over and over again to the wide-eyed Coiners. Lank vowed, as he fondled the reels of tape and the little lights with their grooved ends, to be worthy of his destiny. The ways of Beforeit, he swore in secret to himself and with a piercing joy, would never return as long as he – As long as he lived.

He left the temple with Berg after locking the door, feeling drained and at the same time filled with renewed life and purpose. In the clear sky above him as he looked up, he saw that the moon had elected to share the blue distance with the pale sun.

"It is nearing the time for the year's second Toss," he commented to Berg.

Berg nodded, studying Lank. As if he had reached a difficult decision, he shook his head from side to side and then reached within his robe. He held out his open hand to Lank.

Lank looked down and saw the Coin resting in Berg's palm. He looked up at Berg. He stuck a finger between his teeth and his cheek and retrieved his Coin. "I have my Coin," he said.

"This Coin will now be yours," Berg said. "It is a special Coin as I shall show you. It is the Coin passed down from

generation to generation by those enlisted in the service of Murph. Look at it."

Lank picked the Coin from Berg's palm. At first, as he stared at it, he saw nothing unusual about it. It was a Ten. It was neither new nor old. It was dull with much Tossing. He looked up at Berg, a question in his eyes.

"Turn it."

Lank obeyed and a frown twisted his face. He looked up at Berg again. "But it is –"

"It is the Coin of those whose blood flows down from our ancestor Eisenberg. It is a gift given us by Murph himself."

"But it is imperfect!" Lank protested. "Look you here, Berg See, on this side – a torch and two trees. And here –" Lank turned the Coin to the opposite side and held it, face up, to Berg. "On this side as well – a torch and two trees. It is flawed."

Berg folded his arms and stared steadily at Lank.

"It cannot be Tossed in this flawed form."

"It can," Berg said. "It is a Coin for Winners."

Lank's puzzled frown deepened. "I don't understand."

"I have ordered the Chosen for this Toss to call 'Tails' for Winners. Using this remarkable Coin, you will inevitably Toss Tails. You cannot do otherwise."

"Yes," Lank said, "that I understand. But what I cannot understand is the fact that, by so doing, I take no Chance."

"No. None."

"That is wrong," Lank protested, thrusting the Coin toward Berg as if it had suddenly grown hotly molten in his hand.

Berg made no move to take the Coin. "I must repeat a lesson you may not have fully learned, young Lank. Murph moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. He has said so himself. You have heard him so say. Murph needs you and, by means of this Coin, sees to it that you will remain alive and invulnerable to Randland where death lives. Randland has no need of you. Murph has."

Lank watched as Berg turned and walked away without a backward glance. He looked down at the Coin in his hand It lay beside his own which he had removed from the pouch in his cheek. He was about to call out to Berg, to question him further, but Berg had already disappeared inside the temple. He picked up his own Coin and was about to throw it away when something stopped him. His hand hung motionless in the air before him. A moment later, he popped his own Coin back into its familiar pocket. Then he inserted the other Coin in the opposite cheek where it tasted strange and rested uneasily.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Coiners assembled the next week as Berg had directed in the hour before the dawn. They stood shivering and staring up at the sky in which the moon lounged full, gorged with white light.

Lank stood slightly apart from the other eleven Coiners, not because of his new status as Berg's equal but because the two Coins that chinked against his teeth made him feel oddly estranged from his colleagues. The Ten that Berg had given him kept slipping from its resting place between his teeth and his cheek and at times he wanted more than anything else to be able to let it fall at his feet and walk away from it forever. But Berg had said that Murph himself had given the Coin to those who served him. Murph looked after his own, Berg had implied. Was that not reasonable and to be expected?

Berg gazed thoughtfully at the moon. "It is a Coin with strange markings," he observed. "Murph says that men from Beforeit tried to capture that Coin and, hard though that may be to believe, I believe it." He paused. Then, "Coiners, have you made ready for the Toss?"

One of the young men announced that the beaters had already assembled at the outermost edges of the inhabited areas of Coindom and were awaiting only the first splash of light across the eastern sky before their cymbals would sound and their eyes would detect those hiding in thickets who hoped to escape participation in the Toss.

Another mentioned that the children in the corral were restless, knowing that one of their number would be Chosen to Toss.

"The Chosen has been named," Berg said. "She is ready."

There was a faint murmuring among the Coiners.

Berg went on. "To avoid delay, I went among the children myself last evening and supervised their Tossing. All is prepared."

Lank swallowed hard. How, he wondered, could Berg have done what he said. He had seen Berg in the women's quarters all through the evening. He remembered Berg having told him that the Chosen had been told to Toss Tails. Berg must have selected the Chosen earlier and perhaps he had confused the actual time. But Lank doubted his own reasoning.

"I hope that each of you will Win," Berg was saying. His glance fell with fondness on Lank.

Lank nodded slightly in acknowledgment of that glance. Berg knows that I will Win, he thought, if I use Murph's Coin. He is protecting me. As is Murph. But what of the others? What of Jersey and the fair boy who has only recently joined us?

As if in answer to his thought, Jersey moved out of the crowd and came toward Lank. "Let me touch your Coin for luck," he whispered. "Murph looks with such favor on you that a touch of your Coin should give me a better Chance."

Lank hesitated briefly and then extracted his own Coin from his mouth. Jersey placed an index finger on it and [illegible]

"The dawn!" Berg cried, pointing out across Lost Valley.

The first pale pink fingers of light were splaying out across the dark sky.

"Come," he said and marched off, the Coiners following him in single file.

In the distance, the first faint sounds of the beaters' cymbals sounded, brass voices in the fate-filled air. Lank took up a position at the end of the line but Berg called his name and he sprinted forward to walk beside Berg.

Chanting, the procession moved forward. "*In the shining*

of the sun is he; in the white veils of the moon does he hide. Murph manages. He will deliver us from Randland."

Not all of you, Lank thought as the sound of the cymbals thudded in his head, asking, "Why, why, why?"

Soon they came upon the first of the people moving toward the dread dais centered in the heart of Lost Valley. The hordes of people gave way before the Coiners so that Lank and Berg were the first to arrive at the altar. Berg bent down and picked up charred timbers and tossed them high on the pile. He arranged rusted girders of twisted metal so that the Chosen would be able to be seen high above the lifted heads of the people who had come to fulfill their destiny. Finally, Berg wiped his hands on his filthy robe and stepped down from the dais. He went to the corral and beckoned to the little girl who stood sucking her right thumb just inside the gate. The guards swung the gate open and the little girl eyed Berg solemnly.

Lank moved quickly. He stood quietly behind Berg as Berg knelt down and held out his arms to the child. He

"Come here, child. It is your time. You remember me, don't you?"

The girl substituted her left thumb for her right. In the interval while the mouth was unclogged, she lisped, "Yeth."

"You know that you are the Chosen? I told you that when I was here before."

Out popped the thumb. "Yeth."

"Come, then."

The little girl sidled forward and Berg's arms went around her and lifted her to his shoulder. He confronted the gathered crowd and announced, "Behold the Chosen for the Toss."

If anyone noticed anything unusual about the ritual none gave any sign.

Berg carried the child to the dais and set her down upon it. He pulled her thumb from her mouth and handed her a

Coin – a Ten. She reached for it and slipped, sliding down the heap of refuse. Berg impatiently seized her and plopped her up on the top of it once more. "When I wave my hand," he muttered, "you will Toss." He began to chant the familiar litany that told of Beforeit and the ways to guard against it.

Lank spat both Coins into his hand and stared at them. He put one in each fist and then closed his fists as if to hide them from his sight. It was then that he saw Doll approaching on the far edge of the crowd, leading Lincoln by the hand. Once again, a beater had found her and forced her forward. The beater walked a pace or two behind her, his cymbal silent, seeming to wait for a sign of rebellion so that he might strike this bold girl whose face was filled, not with fear, but with disgust. Lank went to her.

She stopped when she saw him coming. He stopped too. They stared at each other in silence. And then Lincoln let go of Doll's hand and moved toward Lank.

"I am Lincoln, once of the Copper Clan," he said, standing in front of Lank. "I have no Coin."

Lank looked quickly about to see if anyone had heard Lincoln's remark. No one was paying any attention to them. All eyes were fixed on the sullen little girl standing stiffly on the dais. "Doll!" Lank muttered, beckoning.

She came up to him.

"Why did you let him come Coinless? He will be punished!"

"The beaters found him where I had hid him in the baybushes. I thought it better to bring him here and hope that no one would notice that he had not Tossed than to try to escape."

"They'll Decoin him if they find out."

"They will."

Lank unclenched his fists and his Coins fell to the ground. He knew at once what he must do, what he had to do. He stooped and retrieved the Coin Berg had given him and thrust it into Lincoln's hand.

"It is not as bright as the bartering glass," Lincoln observed, turning the Ten in his hand. "But I thank you just the same."

"When the Toss is over, give the Coin back to me," Lank ordered.

Lincoln nodded.

"If you can give it to him now, why can't you let him keep it?" Doll asked suspiciously. "Another six months will pass and then he will have to Toss again."

"Quiet!" Lank commanded.

He looked down at his own Coin and felt a familiar fear. He had experienced it at every Toss of the Coins for the last twelve sets of seasons. And yet his fear had always been unfounded because he had never Lost. But now he had given up Murph's Coin – Berg's Coin? – to Lincoln and he was afraid again. He considered taking back the Coin from Lincoln and giving him his own but he could not bring himself to do it. Lincoln looked so vulnerable and, with no Coin, he was – totally. The beaters had the keen eyes of eagles and the merciless hearts of hungry lions. "I hope you Win," Lank said to Doll.

She shrugged. "It matters little."

Lank found her beauty overwhelming. Even in the coarse garments she wore, she was lovely. She was not like the women who came to the Coiner's cubicles. There was an untouched quality about her that made her seem strong and yet in need of a man's shadow in which she might walk more safely.

Lank felt a pang of regret at her remark. He wished she would show fear as she gazed at the child on the dais. That would at least indicate that she cared about herself and about living.

"– *and as it was Beforeit, is not now and never ever shall be again!*" Berg concluded from where he stood beneath the skinny, thumb-sucking Chosen. He raised his right arm and all the people did the same. Coins glinted in the pale light of the early sun. Berg turned to stare up at the child.

Lank was watching him closely. He whispered something to the girl and then shouted, "Toss! It is to be Tails for Winners!"

"Tossss!" sighed the people.

The child shifted her weight from one leg to the other. She pulled her thumb from her mouth and scratched her hip. She carefully placed the Coin Berg had given her on her thumb and then flicked it skyward. Raising both hands, she caught it as it tumbled down and slapped it down hard upon one wrist.

"T-Tails!" she screeched.

Berg scrambled up the pile of girders and bleached bones and seized her wrist to confirm the outcome of the Toss. "Tails!" he bellowed to the crowd as he gestured to the beaters who quickly moved among the people to check the outcome of each individual Toss to prevent the possibility of cheating.

There was a stirring in the crowd. People embraced and parted. The crowd became a shifting sea, some moving one way, some the other. The Losers were taking up their position in the small grotto from which they would begin the march to Randland and whatever awaited them there. There was a moaning ruptured by an occasional anguished cry. A woman suddenly sprang away from the assembling Losers and ran toward the sloping incline that led out of Lost Valley. At once, a beater materialized behind her and seized her hair and flung her roughly to the ground. He dragged her back and stood over her ominously until she got to her feet of her own accord and took her place again among the other Losers.

Lank at last looked down at his Coin which rested on the back of his right hand. *Heads!*

Doll was watching his face. "You Lost," she said.

He nodded.

"I, too."

"I won!" Lincoln chirped gleefully. "See!" He held out his Coin to Doll.

Lank quickly grabbed it from him and thrust it into his mouth.

"Lincoln," Doll said. "See, the sun rises there. No, don't stare into it. Keep it in the corner of your eye. Travel with it always on your left and soon you will come to the cavern. Stay there and wait for me to return. Be careful not to catch yourself in the trip-trap. Feed Hound. Go now."

Lincoln's face fell. He started to protest but Doll shoved him away from her. He reached out and touched Lank's face. "Speak words to me, brother," he sighed. "As it was before."

Lank could think of nothing to say.

"He does not mean as it was Beforeit," Doll explained "He speaks of the time when you were his friend and knew nothing of betrayal."

Lank pulled away from Lincoln's gentle touch and moved off in the direction of the other Losers. He looked back and saw Doll accept Lincoln's sudden embrace and then free herself and turn and walk away as a beater came menacingly toward her. He waited until she was beside him and then moved forward with her as the beaters prodded stragglers and struggled with those who tried to escape.

"I did not betray Lincoln," Lank said to Doll as they strode along the edge of the crowd. "The Lincoln I – loved – no longer lives."

Doll said nothing.

"I sent you some of the best bartering glass I owned."

"But you did not come yourself."

"I could not. It would not be seemly for a Coiner to come among those who defy Murph."

"Sit then and suck the words of your mighty Murph and think they give you wisdom. They do not. They shrivel your soul and make you less than a man."

The rage that Lank felt rising within him threatened to engulf him. He fought it and walked on. Why, he wondered, do I find myself a moth attracted to this deadly fire? Why does this nearly breastless girl become entangled in my

thoughts? She has set a trap for my mind and I have fallen into it. Evil is she. Her words are filled with hatred for me and yet I long to hear her speak.

They left Lost Valley and made their way across the scarred plains and past the drab relics of Beforeit. Lank found himself staring at things he had seen more than a score of times because he felt the need to memorize their outlines and catalog their shapes. As he passed a rusted machine, he reached out and spun one of its uplifted wheels. It screeched as it spun unevenly. He stared at the letters melded upon it: *Rambler.* A little farther on, he saw the fallen figure of a man still astride his broken horse. The man's face was cracked and one ear was gone. The stiff metal flag in his hand was bent and broken. The man and his horse were Lank's old friends. He had climbed over them many times as a child. *Goodbye man,* he thought. *Goodbye, horse. I may not come this way again. Remember*

A sudden hush swept through the cluster of Losers. No breath escaped from any nostril. No eye blinked and no voice spoke.

Randland lay directly before them. Its sprawling walls had been tumbled by some unimaginable hand. Its roof sagged. Its windows were empty. The melted globules of glass lay in fantastic shapes among the dense growth of the poisonous Afterit plant and no one had ever dared come and carry away these ghastly tears even though such bartering glass would buy many sacks of grain or the services of a brace of the strongest men for a full set of seasons.

"*Hi-yeee!*" cried the beaters. "*Yiee-hi!*" Their cymbals crashed. The Losers let out their collective breath and shrank beneath the blows of the beaters' hard hands as they were driven forward toward the skeletal ruins and into the corridor on which a mysterious sign – *Think the Unthinkable* – hung.

The beaters remained outside but they pointed the way for the Losers who moved in terror toward the open pit

down which they must wend their way. Those in the front pressed back against their companions who were being pelted from behind with stones thrown by the beaters. A few of the people fell into the pit and their screams of pain could be heard echoing up from it. Someone located the crude steps carved into the shaft by other Losers who had come this way before them. They gingerly made their way down the steps that circled the pit in a descending spiral and in which cables hung. When they reached what seemed to be the bottom of the shaft, they eased their bodies through the roof of the broken box-like structure and came out into a narrow corridor down which they crept until they came to a steel room which they hesitantly entered. There were no enemies anywhere among them now. No Clan enmities flared here. Now they were all equal and, like primitive animals, they huddled together taking some small comfort from the warmth they received from the bodies nearest them that proved they were all still alive but hinted also and inevitably of the tenuousness of that fire within them that could be so easily doused by a club or by the creeping contamination that no one had ever seen but which had killed so many of them with a calm unconcern.

"Doll!" Lank whispered.

She stood beside him paralyzed with fear. Her face was white. Her arms were clasped tightly in front of her.

"Doll!" he repeated.

She seemed not to have heard him. Her teeth bit down hard upon her lower lip and her trembling increased.

Suddenly, with no warning, silence died in the room.

"*Come Coinless!*" a voice boomed. It came from nowhere; it came from everywhere.

An old woman who had been running distraught fingers through the wisps of her white hair suddenly screamed. Her cry blended with the voice as it repeated its command.

"*Throw down your Coins and come forward Coinless!*"

The people obeyed. There came the sound of falling

metal, a noisy rain. An abandoned harvest. Coins of every denomination littered the cold floor. Halves. Fives. Fourths. Tens. Cents.

The voice boomed again "*To the left! To your left!*"

"Doll," Lank muttered in a hoarse whisper. "What will happen to us?"

"They say it is different each time," she replied weakly. "And yet the same."

"*To the left! To your left!*"

The Losers scurried to the left and, as they did so, ten even rows of colored buttons burst from the previously smooth surface of the nearest wall.

"*Survives,*" the voice declared. "*Uncoined as now you are,* [illegible]"

Lank shuddered at the thought of Choosing instead of taking a proper Chance. He stared, puzzled, at the colored buttons and then at the people surrounding him. They all seemed as alarmed as he was. Their faces were stark, drained of all emotion except fear.

"*Push and press. Push and press. To push or not to push, that is the question.*"

The old woman near Lank suddenly began to cackle. Her voice held within it the sad ghost of childhood lost. Her giggles unnerved Lank but her suddenly taken action made him step back from her as if she carried the dread contamination that killed so easily. The woman had reached out and pressed a green button.

At once, tables rose up out of the floor, toppling several startled people who scurried out of the way and stood with their backs pressed against the wall, staring at the food that rested on the circular tables.

Minutes passed.

And then, remembering their hunger that had been temporarily forgotten in their fear, several people reached out tentatively to touch the food lying so succulent and innocent upon the tables. A man picked up a steaming piece of meat that lay sopping in a rich and unfamiliar sauce. He stuffed it

into his mouth, staring at the people watching him as if he were proud of his daring. Swallowing, he smiled and licked his upper lip.

Lank reached for a glossy, unfamiliar fruit.

Doll struck his arm. The fruit fell to the floor. Lank turned to her, about to protest.

"Do not," she said.

He studied her pale face, puzzled. But he let the fruit lie where it had fallen as several other people began to eat. Between bites, they talked, their voices no longer quite so strained, although hardly relaxed.

The old woman, obviously encouraged by the results of her button pressing, slammed a parched hand against the yellowest of the buttons.

The people looked up from their eating.

Nothing.

Something.

It began as a faint and distant sighing. Somewhere within the walls there was a hissing. And then a fierce liquid sprayed down upon the people in translucent streams. They screamed and began to flee from the steel room into the ones that opened off it. They climbed over the tables, knocking the food to the floor as they did so. They pushed one another out of the way and leaped over those who had fallen as the sighing became a scream and their own screams became a horrified moaning as they nursed their badly burned flesh from which rose ghostly tendrils of steam.

Lank released a bellow and, as the translucent stream became a trickle and then stopped altogether, he leaped from the corner in which he had flattened himself and ran from the room. He cried out again, a moan of pain that was not caused by scalded skin but by terror which scraped at all his senses. He ran back along the passage to where the shaft was located but, instead of the shaft, he found a solid, impenetrable metal wall. Whimpering, he returned to the empty room and searched in panic for his Coin. At last he

found it, recognizing it by the nicks he had cut in its silver surface. Nearby he found the Coin that Berg had given him.

He Tossed his own Coin. It instructed him to escape. His whimper matured into an anguished moan because he could not obey. The wall prevented him from obeying – from escaping. In despair, he dropped his Coin among the others. Without fully realizing what he was doing, he placed Berg's Ten in the pouch of his cheek.

He eased back along the passage, looking behind him, looking at the smooth walls and up at the unmarked ceiling. He cringed as the voice sounded again.

"*Push and press, push and press. Choose a button.* [redacted]"

As Lank neared the room in which the food had appeared, he glanced inside and saw the tables descending and heard the *whoossshh* as the spilled food was sucked out of sight. He went to the doorway leading to an adjoining room and looked inside. The people who had been burned were nursing their seared flesh. Others cried out in agony and writhed on the floor. And died.

The food, Lank thought. Poisoned!

He was about to enter the room in search of Doll when rectangular ramrods came pulsing piston-like out of the walls, forcing the people – those who still lived – back into the room of the buttons where the voice commanded them to press, to push!

They did. Desperately, randomly.

Little knives sliced through the room and through their flesh. Thin needles of flame jetted like red fish to fry them and silence the many mouths that were alive with shrieks.

Lank squeezed himself into the juncture made by the meeting of two walls. He stared wildly about and saw Doll crouching down to escape the knives and the flames. He was about to call out to her when he saw her eyes glaze and her body seem to wither and collapse upon itself. She lay unmoving on the floor beyond his reach.

Without fully realizing what he was doing, Lank sprang

forward and seized Doll and dragged her to his narrow refuge. And then, amazed at his own action, he let her slump to the floor at his feet. He inched down the angular juncture and drew her body close to his feet and away from the knives and the jets of flame.

The last knife clattered to the floor. The final flame sputtered and died.

The distant wall began to glow.

Lank thrust his fist against his mouth in order to suppress a scream. He watched as the wall seemed to deepen to reveal what looked to him like another room just beyond the wall which was now totally transparent. A three-dimensional figure appeared beyond or in the wall . . . Lank could not be sure. The man wore a battered helmet and torn uniform. He was surrounded by brilliant flowers which, Lank guessed, must have grown Beforeit. The man could only be from Beforeit. No Clan that Lank knew wore such a costume. He watched the man moving stealthily through the foliage which hid no single bird. And then he saw another man appear. The glinting object in the second man's hand blazed and a loud blast reverberated in the air. The first man faltered and fell. Blood soaked the man's uniform and the strange flowers he crushed beneath him.

Another voice sounded from somewhere. Lank put his hands over his ears, afraid of what he might hear. But the voice was piercing. Lank could do nothing but listen.

"*I have made my decision, gentlemen. And my decision, in this year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and eighty nine, as you are all well aware, is binding on the nation. I have decided to ask Congress to declare –*"

The voice stopped in mid-phrase.

In the wall appeared a console of switches and buttons and men's hands. Fingers tirelessly and eagerly pressed, flicked, pushed, switched.

Then, a Beforeit place. Stones and bricks and bodies. All bursting, bursting like flowers of flame in a garden of sudden white light. And over all, thick halos of dense smoke

billowed up to make room for the wicked wind of the firestorm that followed.

"*Gentlemen, I have made my decision!*"

A malicious ghost, the echo came: "*My decision!*"

And then a long silence.

Lank felt relief threaten to totter him. He looked down at Doll who lay unconscious at his feet. His head jerked up at the sudden rasping sound which was followed by a sharp click and then a new voice, this one desperate and pleading.

"*Stop building this thing, Murph, please! There's no point. There's nothing anymore. This is not the way*"

The articulation of Murph's name gave Lank some hope. He was here and therefore there was hope. He listened to the voice which had called upon Murph.

"*I'm willing to admit my part in this. But, God knows, I thought I was right. I thought President Leur was right. But now I know his – our – decision was wrong. Don't you see, Murph? It wasn't our decision-making that was wrong. Only some of our decisions.*"

Lank remained wary as he listened, occasionally glancing down at Doll and then up at the walls surrounding him.

"*Go to hell, Eisenberg! The Toss I've been teaching the Survives and this macabre little circus I'm ringmastering here will guarantee no more war or rumors of war – ever! As soon as I get the bugs out of the damned thing, that is. Hey, will you watch out for Christ's sake! You've tripped the tape. It's picking us up! Shut it off! Shut it off!*

"*Murph, you're insane. You're –*"

Click.

After a moment the first voice again. "*Push and press, push and press. Choose!*"

Lank couldn't believe his ears. Was that not Murph's voice?

From the cowering people in the room: "No!"

"*Decide!*"

"No, oh, noooo!"

"Will you not then?"

In reply came only pleas of mercy from those who had known none since descending to the halls of Randland.

The voice spoke again. This time it was emotionless and quite calm. *"You have seen your ancestors and the results of their decision-making. Their decisions made by themselves with the faulty fiber of their own individual brains. Go you now and do not likewise!"*

"Murph!" Lank yelled. "Murph, wait!"

From somewhere in the distance, Lank heard the sound of metal moving against metal. He turned and stared down the passage. The wall was sliding back to reveal the box through which Losers entered Randland.

"Decide not!" bellowed Murph's voice. *"You have seen the bitter fruit of decision-making! Go and do not likewise!"*

Numbly, the survivors moved out into the passage and picked up their Coins. Some kissed them; some pressed them to their foreheads. Others made strange and magical signs in the air with them.

Behind them, the wall went dark and became only a wall again. It no longer mirrored the world of Beforeit.

The people began to climb into the broken box and up through the hole at its top, past the heavy cables and the wheels. Lank was among the first of them. He did not look back at the dead scattered about the building.

Halfway up the shaft, he halted, ignoring the cries and curses of those below him who resented the obstacle he presented to them. He began to fight his way back down again, kicking and shouting, tumbling people beneath him and not caring.

He emerged from the huge box and ran down the corridor and into the steel room where Doll was still lying motionless among the dead and dying.

"Come Coinless!" Murph's voice boomed again. It came from nowhere; it came from everywhere.

Lank spun around, startled

"Throw down your Coins and come forward Coinless!"

Lank was about to take his Coin from his cheek but he lowered his hand, his face thoughtful.

"To the left! To your left!"

He hesitated briefly and then, his thoughts spilling through his mind in unregulated and chaotic fashion, moved lithely toward the now buttonless wall. He stared steadily at the wall and, as he had anticipated, the buttons reappeared.

"Push and press. Push and press."

He glanced back at the door through which he had come He looked down at Doll lying helpless before him as if she too were one of the already dead. He was about to kneel down beside her, about to call her name, about to lift her up and carry her away when the thought seized him. Everything was happening now as it had happened before. His arrival had coincided with its recurrence. A coincidence? He looked around him as the voice droned on as before. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the wall. He sniffed along it at the point where it met the floor. The odor of age assaulted his nostrils. He put out a hand and felt the wall. Heat. Suddenly, he withdrew his hand. A seed of blood sprouted on the tip of one finger. He saw what had caused the tiny wound. There, in the corner, the wall failed to meld perfectly with the floor. A jagged piece of metal had torn his finger. He thought a moment and then removed Berg's Ten from his cheek and inserted it in the crack he had discovered. He twisted the Coin back and forth, working diligently for many minutes. Suddenly, the panel swung open as if of its own accord.

Lank popped his Ten back into his mouth and peered cautiously through the space behind the panel. The room beyond was not unlike the temple of Murph. Tapes spun soundlessly. In the center was the fuel cell that powered the automated complex which was activated by the myoelectric impulses from human bodies as they entered the steel room through the door at the end of the corridor.

There was a pile of rags lying in the center of the complex. Lank approached it, speculating about its purpose. He put out a foot and touched it. As dust swirled up from the decaying fabric, bones became visible. Lank stared down at the skeleton clothed in its robe of rags. He studied the words taped to the crumbling cloth:

Joseph Murphy
Chief Programmer
Rand Corp.

He sounded the letters softly. *Joz-eff Murf-fee. Joseph Murphy!*

Murph!

He made out the words sewn in scarlet thread beneath the rectangular white tape:

REPENT

It was a word he had heard Eisen use before the man's Decoining. Eisen had often said that Murph demanded that each man and each woman repent the ways of Beforeit. Eisen had been right! Here was the proof!

Lank walked gingerly around the skeleton and, after some searching, found the door that led to the automated computer room where he discovered the hydroponic tanks from which the frost-free food came. He stared at the conveyor belt that carried it to and deposited it upon the tables. As he watched, the tables began to rise on extended pedestals, ready to thrust themselves neatly through the openings that appeared above them. As they slowly rose, vials of poison clutched in metal claws dipped to spill their deadliness upon the potatoes, the pickles, and the oranges.

Lank stood, trying not to think, trying to banish the thoughts that rioted through his brain. Joseph Murphy – Murph – was dead. He had been but – a man. And now he

was dead. Only his machineries remained. He had been a – Lank looked again at the words on the tape. He had been a Chief Programmer, not a god. And whatever a Chief Programmer was, it was not what the people of Afterit believe of Murph. And Randland! Randland was not Randland but something else. Rand Corp. The strangeness of it all was, in a way, almost as miraculous as the reality that Lank now began to realize was a lie. Despair gripped him with fingers of iron. He moaned, knowing himself for a fool and the most desolate of Losers. He knew himself for a man who could no longer believe in what was because he had seen its genesis and that stark vision was his undoing. Suddenly, he remembered Doll. The tables had completed their descent some minutes ago. Next would come the fiery liquid that ate flesh. He ran back into the steel room.

Doll was gone.

He slammed shut the wall he had pried open earlier and was about to race down the corridor when a sudden *whoosshing* sound filled the air. Troughs opened in the floor and the bodies that littered it were sucked down and out of sight. Suction centers scoured the floor when the troughs closed. In horror, Lank fled from the room. He climbed the shaft and came out into the brilliance of the day which temporarily blinded him. A moment later, he saw Doll moving swiftly away through the nude stalks of the trees.

"Doll!" he cried.

When he reached her, he was out of breath and could not speak for a moment. When he recovered himself, he said, "You would not let me eat when first there was food."

"I had Lost before," she said. "I was afraid of what might happen to you if you ate."

Lank stared at her, feeling the hot flood welling up behind his eyes and fighting to keep it from breaking the dam of his eyelids. As he stared at her, he thought that in her rebellion she had defied no one and nothing. Murph was dead. This girl before him – *I want*, he thought. *I need*. But

his Coin, he remembered, had been left behind in Randland. No, in Rand Corp. But he still had the two-tailed Coin Berg had given him. He could Toss Tails and take her. Somehow, he knew he could not. If he were to ever take her again, it would have to be without a Toss – no, in some other way he was at the moment afraid to even hope for.

"Why did you remain in Randland?" Doll asked him. "I thought you had gone. Were you hurt?"

Lank shook his head. But he knew he was hurt However, his hurt was beyond explaining here, now, to Doll.

She saw the stunned expression like dull fire on his face. And then she felt his touch on her arm – that of first one finger, then his whole hand – and it shattered her with its clumsy gentility. Her tension betrayed her and she let herself weep.

"Come," he said.

"[illegible]"

"To the temple of Murph. Together. You and I."

"You've Tossed?"

"My Coin lies below in Randland."

"You are abandoning it?" With a giant hope.

"We will go now." With a dwarfing despair.

"They will not admit me."

"They will admit you. I will arrange it."

"[illegible]"

"I have – plans."

CHAPTER FIVE

Berg sent the woman away after paying her with a particularly valuable piece of azure bartering glass. He got up and put on his robe and strolled out into the courtyard. He stretched. The day was good. The world was good. Eisen was gone.

Berg lived now under a cloudless sky. There were no more questions and no more veiled criticisms to trouble him. He felt free. He went back inside and unlocked the room behind Murph. Inside it, he busied himself with dials and switches. All was in order. He examined the brown stack of tapes. He smiled. Here was Murph sulky. Here, pensive. Murph lay silent and slick in his hands. And, by implication, so did the world of Afterit and its ways. If Eisen had but known! But Eisen had been content to follow the forms of Afterit and not concern himself with the guiding mechanisms which hid within those forms. Too bad. Eisen's lack of curiosity was the path that had led him to his Decoining.

Now Berg was alone. No, he thought, not alone. There was Lank. A believer, an innocent. But Berg knew that innocence was a supple tree that could be made to grow in odd directions. He had but to bend that tree properly and his power, although shared, would eventually remain absolute. And it would be easy. He would show Lank truth in small quantities and subtly erode his sense of shock until Lank was left with only truth without knowing how he had arrived, step by slow step, at that bleak estate. But it would have to be done carefully and slowly. It would have to be done cleverly, too, because Berg knew that too much truth too quickly could render useless the tool he was fashioning of Lank who had once been a Coiner and who would one

day be the new Eisen. An Eisen with neither mercy nor hope As Berg himself was. For a moment, Berg regretted all that had been and much of what was to come. But only for a moment, because he knew that, like the passing of bits of bartering glass from hand to hand, so was Time traded and, in the process, innocence was exchanged for knowledge and joy for wisdom. Berg believed – and so would Lank, given sufficient time and enough training – that only fools cherished illusions. The clever man traded illusion for truth. Such a bargainer conquered and the amazing fact of that matter was that the fools always thought they had triumphed and not been conquered. They would not recognize the face of their ruler if it were pointed out to them. They would be content.

Berg knew that it was merely a matter of damming up the flow of truth so that only a trickle came through at a time. He put down the stack of tapes. Let Murph remain quiet for a time.

As he came out a moment later into the inner area of the temple, he went over to Lank's cubicle, bent down and called Lank's name. When he received no answer, he realized he hadn't seen Lank since – Lank had disappeared in the confusion following the Toss. He went outside and found the Coiners diligently trimming the thick growth of baybushes. The bushes were clipped in many places and their branches twisted to form the mystic letters so dear to Murph:

FORTRAN

And:

ALGOL

"Have you seen Lank?" Berg asked them.

None had.

Odd, Berg thought.

He was about to return to his own quarters to satisfy the hunger that rumbled within him when he saw Lank approaching in the distance. He was not alone. There was a

woman – no, a young girl – with him. Ah, so that was it! He had been lying hard between those sleek legs since the Toss.

"Welcome," Berg said as Lank entered the courtyard. "You have brought a girl to serve Murph?"

Lank nodded. "Her name is Doll. But I ask that she be quartered here under the eye of Murph and not enlisted – at least not right away – in the service of his servants."

Berg caught Lank's wink. "She will be your responsibility then," he said solemnly. Let the boy have his pleasures, he thought. It could be explained later to the Coiners that this was but a measure of Lank's new status. He said, "Murph is glad that you Won."

Lank's eyes widened ingenuously. "Won? Did you not know? I Lost."

"Impossible!" Berg spluttered and then caught himself as he saw the Coiners look up at the sound of his exclamation. "I mean – I thought you had Won."

"No." Lank said. "My Coin came up Heads."

Berg's nostrils flared. There was something strange here. He drew Lank to one side. "You did not Toss the Coin I gave you?"

"I could not, Berg. I would not have taken a proper Chance."

"I see." Berg decided that the trickle of truth he had begun to let flow in Lank's direction had been perhaps too strong and sudden a draught. This would take time; more time than he had anticipated. "Lank," he said, "you risk offending Murph. It is, as I told you, his Coin."

"I know." Lank responded humbly. "I left my own Coin in Randland." He tapped his cheek. "Murph's Coin is now here."

Berg clapped him on the back. "Good, good. But say nothing of your Coin to the others. It would not be wise."

Lank glanced in Doll's direction and then at Berg. "Is she not fit flesh for a Coiner?"

"For Murph himself," Berg agreed enthusiastically. "Perhaps you will let me –"

"Perhaps," Lank said. "Yes, perhaps I will."

There was something about Lank's tone that annoyed Berg And his eyes. Were they really quite so innocent? Was there not some sly hint of amusement flickering on his face?

Lank beckoned to Doll. "This man," he told her, "is Berg, a descendant of the dread Eisenberg."

Doll said nothing.

"Come," Lank said. "I will show you my cubicle where you may stay." He turned to Berg. "I will be back and then you will teach me more of Murph?" It was only barely a request.

"I will."

Lank took Doll to his cubicle. "You will live here with me. Or, if you prefer, you may leave me."

Doll studied Lank's face but learned nothing. "What of Lincoln?"

"Let him remain in your cavern for now. In time, perhaps I will be able to bring him here as well. In time."

"He is included in your – your plans?"

"Yes."

Doll felt a faint stirring of unease within her. Nevertheless, she stooped down and crawled into Lank's cubicle. She lay down, suddenly overwhelmed with weariness, and fell asleep almost at once.

Lank returned to Berg, wearing an eager expression – one that declared he was hopeful of exploring further the mysteries of Murph. His lean body betrayed none of the tension that inwardly racked it. He nodded to Berg and, without waiting for a response, made his way around Murph and unlocked the door. He knew Berg would follow.

Berg did. "Where did you find her?" he inquired of Lank with comradely expression that said he as well as Lank was a hearty connoisseur of female flesh.

"In Randland," Lank replied.

"She had Lost?"

"Yes."

"Is she –?" A leer.

"Yes." Lank looked directly at Berg. "But it takes a man of some sinew to set her juices flowing She does not flop like a weak fish the moment the eyes of any man assault her."

Berg was annoyed. Something was definitely wrong. Lank's words were matter-of-fact. But there was something about the words – a rough edge of mockery.

"Teach me, Berg," Lank said.

Berg gave a nervous laugh and leaned against Murph. "Perhaps now is not the time for teaching. Your temper is uneven and I hear anger echoing in your voice."

"I am not angry, Berg. But Randland is an experience to twist the temper of any man, even the most serene. And I had never Lost before."

"You need not have Lost this time," Berg countered. He heard the raw sound of his own voice and realized he had been infected by Lank's own subtle anger.

"I was foolish."

"Yes, you were that. You thought yourself humble but your fault was pride."

"I do not understand."

"You asked me to teach you. I will do so now. I gave you the Coin of Murph. Yet you refused to Toss it, telling yourself perhaps that you were not worthy to possess it. You were determined to take your chance, Murph's favor notwithstanding. That is a mistaken pride. Listen to me, Lank, and learn this lesson well. When Murph's finger touches a man, he is no longer his own man but Murph's Therein lies true humanity which brings its own rewards. And they are many."

"When you chose me," Lank said, "I was untried."

"No, unwise. And it was not I who chose you. It was Murph."

"I wait for your further lessons."

Berg said, "What is it you would know?"

"I long to unravel the words of Murph so that I may understand his ways. You decide when he will speak. How do you know what he will say?"

"We – the descendants of Eisenberg – have served Murph through many sets of seasons. We learn quickly what his tapes contain. We spend long days and even longer nights in study of them. They become familiar. This one here, for example." Berg touched the topmost tape on the stack he had examined earlier. "On this one Murph laments the lack of repentance among the Clansmen. And on this one here, he rejoices in the continuity of Coindom."

"What is this object?" Lank asked, pointing to the apparatus beside the tapes.

"It has no name."

"But its function?"

"It can be used to transfer parts of Murph's commentary to a new and untouched tape. As a scholar, I have little use for this object. Murph's words in their pure and unaltered form are enough for me."

Lank studied the object he had inquired about as a thought began to form in his mind. "Then other Eisens and other Bergs have made Murph speak according to their own understanding? That is so?"

"They have so done in seasons past."

"And this? What is this?"

"This allows one to hear what Murph says before he speaks to the gathered Coiners or the Clansmen. I will show you."

Berg explained the operation of the monitoring unit and, when he had finished, Lank asked for a demonstration. Berg inserted a tape and handed the audio unit to Lank and showed him how to place it in his ear.

Lank's expression, as he listened, changed. At first, only awe was etched on his face. And then what might have been considered rapture appeared. Or elation. He removed the audio unit after several minutes and handed it back to Berg.

"It is not usually necessary to monitor beforehand,"

Berg commented. "When you have served beside me for a while, you will have committed to memory most of Murph's words. You will hear them over and over again as new crops of Coiners come at the conclusion of each lunar year."

"But for now, it would be well for me to listen – and to learn."

"As you choose."

"Choose, Berg?"

Berg hesitated. Lank was waiting for what he would say. He decided that the trickle of truth might as well become a rushing stream. The unpredictable result of his releasing more information could nevertheless be controlled. "Yes, choose, Lank," he said firmly. "With enlightenment comes responsibility. It is not necessary for you – for men in our position – to Toss each time we face a decision. Men in our position must abandon the safe ways of Coindom because we must care for all the people and our learning lets us move unfettered through mazes of options. But Murph guides us."

Lank began to pace about. "In Rand Corp –"

"What did you say?"

Lank turned ingenuous eyes upon Berg. "I started to say that in Randland I learned from –" He stopped talking, watching Berg closely.

"Go on," Berg commanded. "What was it you learned in Randland?"

"I heard Eisenberg speak to Murph. He said that decision-making was not wrong. Only certain decisions. Now that you have explained about Tossing, I begin to understand. Have you heard your ancestor speak in the halls of Randland?"

Berg shook his head. "I have not. I have never Lost."

Lank laughed aloud. "Of course. You too then must possess a Coin that always Wins."

"I do. As do you now."

"Then you do not know that Murph lives in Randland as

well as here. You do not know that Eisenberg lives there too."

"I told you, I have never Lost."

"How lucky you are. I mean how favored of Murph to be one of the few who cannot Lose. How many of us are there, Berg?"

"But two. You and I."

"But two," Lank repeated. "Only two who need never fear the wrath of Randland – of Murph." He continued his pacing. "Berg?"

"Yes?"

"Could Murph have been a man – only that? Eisenberg, too?"

"You blaspheme!" Berg roared. "You desecrate the one you serve!"

"I meant you no harm."

"Not me, you fool! *Murph!*"

"I try only to learn," Lank said quietly. "I meant no harm."

"How did you learn the word: Corp?"

"Why, it was painted in flames on the wall of a steel room. What means it, Berg?"

"You lie! There is no word painted –!"

"Ah, so you *have* been in Rand Corp! You *have* Lost."

"Never!"

"You mean that you have never been in Rand Corp? Or that you have never Lost?"

Berg muttered something.

"You knew that the word Corp was not lettered on any Randland wall."

Berg strode away without answering.

Lank felt no sense of victory. The harsh taste of Afterit ashes lay dry and dreary on his tongue. He turned and stared at Murph, at the receptacles of Murph's voice. He ran his hands through his long hair and moaned. He raised his head and spat on Murph.

"Behold!" a voice behind him cried out in triumph.

Lank whirled around to find Berg and several Coiners standing some distance away.

Berg raised his arm and the chattering Coiners fell silent. "He defiles Murph. You have seen his iniquity. I shall Toss to determine if he must be Decoined. Tails will cause it."

Berg Tossed. He displayed his Coin for the others to see. Tails.

Lank ran from the room but the exit was blocked by more Coiners. He looked at them, from face to face. He saw hatred there and fear. He saw something else, much more dangerous – jealousy. It made a mask of Jersey's face. It flowered even on the fair face of the youngest of the Coiners who had been appointed in Lincoln's place.

"Take him!" Berg ordered, lowering his arm and pointing at Lank.

The Coiners began to edge forward. Lank tensed as the Coiners spread out and moved in upon him, a living net in which he would soon be caught unless –

He lunged to the right and the Coiners sprang after him at once. He pulled up short and eluded their grasping hands. In a moment, he had recovered his balance and leaped back to where the startled Coiners had left an opening blocked only by the gesticulating bulk of the angry Berg. He threw out both arms and sent Berg sprawling He ran out into the courtyard beyond. He headed for – any-

But Jersey brought him down with a thick thud just beyond the tortured baybushes. When Lank regained consciousness, he stared up at Jersey who was standing over him with a faint smile on his face. Lank turned his head and saw the familiar words: FORTRAN, ALGOL.

Berg was crying out in rage. Within minutes the attendants appeared and then disappeared to follow his loud order to prepare for Lank's Decoining.

Lank stared up at Jersey. Jersey's grim smile scared him.

He saw a new satellite come to fill the sky above him, the sky which a moment ago had held only the ominous planet

of Jersey's looming head. Berg appeared, beckoning wildly.

The attendants obediently rolled the symbolic Coin up and dropped it beside Lank. As they reached for him, Lank struggled but there were three of them, all burly, and although he was far from weak, he was quickly overpowered. They used strips of tough rawhide to strap his wrists to the metal clamps fastened in the huge wheel. They did the same with his ankles.

Spread out against the face of the monstrous Coin, Lank pulled at the bonds binding him. They held. The only result of his effort was pain that came from his cut flesh into which the rawhide had eaten.

"Berg!" he shouted. "You cannot kill me. Murph himself has designated me successor to Eisen. I own the Coin that –!"

"Silence him!" Berg screeched, drowning out Lank's final words that told of always Winning.

The attendants bent and scooped up soil and stuffed it into Lank's mouth. He twisted his head from side to side and, working his tongue furiously, succeeded in dislodging the dirt.

Before he could speak again, Berg himself bent down and tied a strip of rawhide about his mouth. It cut deep into Lank's lips and, as Berg knotted it at the base of his skull, only unintelligible words rumbled forth through the gates of Lank's teeth which Berg had forced open by his action.

"Proceed!" Berg commanded the attendants.

They raised the wooden wheel and began to roll it toward the base of High Hill.

The world that was visible to Lank began to turn as the attendants began to roll the great wheel up the worn path that gutted High Hill. The trees tilted and the sun revolved. Lank strained his arms and legs until the sun went red and the trees swam in a sea of his own sweat. The laboring attendants moved on. The symbolic Coin moved upward. The world unwound. Someone cried Lank's name.

Lank saw her come running, end over end, through the

upturned trees, past the revolving sun, toward the angular compass he had become.

He called out to her. "Olill!" He wanted to tell her to go away from him and what was to come. He wanted to tell her to stop beating her fists against the heaving shoulders of the attendants. He had to make her save herself. Berg would –

"What feeble beast is this that beats its arms so vainly?" taunted one of the groaning attendants, mightily amused at Doll's fury.

"This beast," she screamed back at the man, "will tear out your heart and hold it up bloody to the sky for the birds to feast upon."

The attendant muttered something to his companions who shifted their positions so he could release his hold on the Coin.

"*Olill!*" Lank cried too late.

She fell beneath the massive flung-down fist of the attendant. But she was on her feet again at once, wary now, and circling.

Lank cried out in pain as the other attendants let the Coin fall to the ground. He lay there, unable to see what was taking place nearby, able only to blink the water from his eyes which suffered under the hot onslaught of the now stationary sun.

And then he heard Doll scream.

He felt the Coin being raised up again. When it was upright, his head pointed to the ground. He saw Doll lying crumpled some distance away. As the world once more began to unwind while the Coin resumed its ascent, he remained silent. It was all that was left to him. He could not fight his captors. He could not aid Doll. He could only dumbly wait for what would soon happen to him. There was no one to help him. He thought of Marph and his head twisted involuntarily to one side as if to avoid an unpleasant sight.

The attendants stopped when they reached the summit of High Hill. Then, after a moment during which they fought to slow their breathing that had become heavy as a result of

their labor, Lank looked out at the world that no longer moved insanely and he cursed it and Coins and Berg and Afterit and himself.

The attendants turned the Coin so that the sun vanished from Lank's sight. In shadow now, he waited, barely breathing. The attendants gave the Coin a grunting shove and sent it careering wildly down High Hill.

Everything blurred before Lank – became a kaleidoscope of green and gray and brown and yellow. The thundering of the Coin beat in his ears and its erratic wobbling jerked the world away from him. Faster it went and faster still until it struck something that turned it aside and then Lank felt the tearing of his flesh as the bare branches of blind trees lashed him mercilessly.

For but a single second that was sundered from an eternity, he saw the chasm into which he was plunging. And then – an emptiness.

Doll lay drowning in a pool of darkness that slowly undulated and stole from somewhere a pale violet light. The soothing spectrum shifted and the world that had lost her temporarily pried at her eyes with persistent fingers of light and she became conscious again, her hand reaching out automatically for the security of Hound but closing on only air.

Berg was standing above her, staring down with his ugly eyes that inventoried the promising merchandise of her body.

She moved slightly, inching away from him. When she was on her feet, she raised her eyes to the summit of High Hill. "He's –"

"Dead," Berg said, "or dying."

"Dying," Doll repeated, unable to speak the first word that Berg had used. The second one held at least the promise of time remaining. The other admitted of nothing but a total finality. She started to move from the courtyard. Her steps were slow; they matched the plodding of her heart that beat with a dull thunder.

"Stay!" Berg called after her.

She halted but didn't turn around.

"Join the other women here. In all of Afterit, there is no safer sanctuary."

With her back a barrier to Berg, Doll said, "I seek no sanctuary."

Berg came up beside her and touched her bare arm. She recoiled.

"You are young now," he said, "and you can survive. The young and strong do so almost with ease. But a time will come –"

Doll looked at Berg. "Why?"

"Because it comes to us all at last and –"

She shook her head in annoyance. "Why was he Decoined?" She realized with some surprise that she had never spoken Lank's name aloud.

"Blasphemy," Berg replied.

"That explains nothing," Doll retorted.

Berg shook an almost playful finger in her face. "Ah, my dear child, it explains everything – here."

Doll turned and walked out of the courtyard without looking back. As she moved off into the arena of Afterit, she heard male voices begin to chant behind her.

"*When Irish eyes are smiling. . . .*"

She could spare them not even her disdain.

She circled the foot of High Hill although she wanted to continue on past it and not confront the awful message of mortality that she knew must be lying somewhere nearby. Still, she continued walking about the area. She thought of calling Lank's name. But, somehow, she could not bring herself to do it. Dead, Berg had said. She had to see. She had to look upon the broken body and feel its coldness and touch its motionless chest and *know*.

She arrived at last at the rim of the chasm and gazed down. A shudder ran through her body as she saw the Coin lying below that covered Lank completely except for his fingers, which were splayed out and empty, clutching not

even the earth below which had taken him to her as her own.

She made her way down the incline slipping and sliding, preparing herself to know with a chill certainty that those fingers which had touched her arm with such awkward grace not long ago would never again touch another arm. She had to know that those eyes in which she thought she had glimpsed a hopeful horizon were sightless now.

She knelt and a shudder shook her entire body as she reached out and touched the motionless fingers that sprouted beyond the rim of the monstrous wooden Coin.

Cold.

The fire that had only recently begun to burn within her died. Convulsively, she tightened her grip on Lank's fingers. They moved slightly. She released them quickly as if they were the blazing faggots that fed her inner fire.

Lank groaned. His fingers dug shallow runnels in the ground.

"Lank." The name slipped from her lips and was lost on the temperamental wind that suddenly rushed past and then withdrew. "Lank."

An answering moan, as faint as her own uttering of his name.

She tried to raise the Coin but succeeded in lifting it only inches from the ground before its weight defeated her and she was forced to let it drop. She stood up and looked around anxiously as if she expected to see someone, someone with a kind face and strong arms, ready to come to her aid. But there was no one. Only the sky was not empty. In it, birds with tufted necks and cruel beaks swept in and out of the gathering clouds.

"I will come back," Doll said, reaching out to take Lank's fingers again in her own. "I will bring Lincoln. We will free you."

No sound came in response to her promise. Perhaps he was no longer conscious, Doll thought. Perhaps he was – *No*, she thought. The word was firm in her mind. It

waved there, a flag of defiance. She got up and began to run.

Her eyes admitted the existence of the world of Afterit through which she ran, but her mind paid it no attention. The only thing that existed for her now was her cavern and the demented inhabitant of that cavern. His strength would be needed if Lank were to live. It did not matter that his mind wandered. It would not be his mind that would grip the great Coin and raise it to let Lank look again at the open sky and escape the hungering birds it harbored.

In all her hunting, Doll's heart had never throbbed so violently. Never had her limbs ached as now. This was no mere hunt for food or for fun. This was a matter demanding a total effort and she, in making it, minded neither the pain in her muscles nor the ache in her chest caused by her violent breathing.

When she arrived at the cavern, she cried out for Lincoln.

It was Hound who came to her. His joy was measured in his four prancing feet and in his sharp barks and eager bounding.

"Lincoln!"

He appeared some distance away. When he saw Doll, he whooped a welcome and came running toward her.

"Lank – has been – hurt," she told him between gasps. "We must help him."

"Who would hurt such a one? Why?"

"Come, Lincoln." She went inside the cavern and withdrew her knife from its hiding place. She placed it in her waistband and then went outside again. She grabbed Lincoln's hand and began to drag him back the way she had come. He gave her no argument. Soon he was running ahead of her, tossing glances back at her over his shoulder, offering her smiles of encouragement. "I will Win this race!" he called back to her. "I am a Winner!"

Small animals scurried out of their way as they tore through the underbrush. Overhead, birds fluttered, protesting in their screams the disturbance Doll and Lincoln were causing.

Lincoln abruptly veered off to the right. A large and oddly shaped piece of granite had caught his attention. Doll dragged him away from it, ignoring his mild protests. They continued running.

When they reached Lank, Lincoln stood pensively, staring down at the Coin.

Doll guessed that a memory was stirring somewhere within the haunted crevices of his mind. "Lift it," she ordered, bending down and gripping the wood.

Lincoln shook his head, muttered something and then bent to follow her example. "Why does Lank hide from us?"

Doll did not reply.

When they had at last righted the Coin and laid it gently down on its opposite side, they saw the battered thing that adorned it and whose blood had crusted it.

Doll ran her hands over Lank's body. Over his legs, along his arms and down the dirty expanse of his chest. As she touched his ribs, he cried out weakly.

"They are not broken," she said, speaking more to herself than to Lincoln or Lank. "And the holes in your hide can be mended." She took her knife from her waistband and cut the thongs binding Lank's wrists and ankles. She then removed the rawhide gag that bound his mouth.

For the first time, he opened his eyes. He promptly closed them again as if the light were too bright or his vision of the world around him too painful.

"Move your arms. Your legs." Doll watched as he obeyed her. She saw him grimace, saw his teeth clench and then clamp tightly on his lower lip. "We will carry you," she said. "Lincoln and I."

Lank's eyes were on her but he said nothing.

She told Lincoln what he must do. Lincoln bent down and lifted Lank and placed his arms over his own shoulders, gripping them tightly. He bent forward so that Lank's feet would not drag along the ground and began to cautiously ascend the side of the chasm.

Doll followed them, thinking her own thoughts that were centered on the Coinless state the three of them shared. She barely heard Lincoln's humming of the song he had learned in that other age when he had been a Coiner and no alien in the world of Afterit.

They passed through groves of barren trees and the Place of Pits where ashes eddied in the air. Once, near High Hill, they saw a group of hunters who bore the banner of the Tribe of Five. Their hair was worn long and tied at the napes of their necks with ribbons in imitation of the Before-it man whose face adorned the Coin of their clan.

There was something strange stirring in the air. At least Doll thought so As she looked about her, she knew that everything was the same as it had always been. But she felt that something somewhere had subtly altered. The feeling had grown within her ever since her last experience in Randland. It had begun - It had begun the moment Lank had touched her arm. She fastened her gaze upon his limp form that hid Lincoln from her and she felt the strange something stirring not in the outer air but inside herself

"Rest," she called out to Lincoln. "Lay him down for a time."

"I would go on," Lincoln called back to her without slowing his pace or turning. "Is it that you have grown weary?"

"We'll go on then," she replied.

They walked on in silence until they came at last to the cavern where Hound waited and which would now shelter four instead of three. Doll went inside and spread out furs and motioned to Lincoln who lowered Lank down upon them.

Lincoln then went to the nearby stream and brought back water which Doll used to wash Lank's wounds. None, she noticed, were serious. She made poultices and bound them to various parts of his body. Afterward, she gathered some smooth stones and placed them in the center of the fire she had kindled in the cavern. She removed the heated

stones and wrapped them in a soft piece of goatskin and placed them against Lank's chest. He sighed as their heat began to penetrate his body and ease his badly bruised ribs.

Outside the cavern, night was claiming the world the sun had temporarily abandoned and smothering it in a soft dark mantle. Hound lay just outside the cavern, his ears erect, his muzzle resting on his front paws. A dog's distant howl broke the silence. Hound arose, threw back his head and flung an answering howl into the darkness.

Doll spitted a piece of goat's meat and turned the spit until the outside of the meat was charred to lock in its tender juices. Then she removed it from the spit and cut it into small pieces which she dutifully fed to Lank, one by one.

Later, when she and Lincoln had also eaten and Hound had grown quiet in a corner, Doll checked the trip-trap and then lay down to sleep. Lincoln did the same.

Lank's murmuring woke her. She didn't know how long she had slept. It might have been hours or only minutes. She sat up and listened to Lank's words that drifted to his lips from the sea of sleep that rocked him.

"... the Coin that always Wins. You say that Murph ... dead and ever so shall be ... yes, but I live and, though Coinless now...."

Lank's words drifted away on the withdrawing tide of sleep and then began again in a sudden rush.

"When the white eye of the moon next opens wide, I will ...!"

He jerked violently in his sleep and awoke. "Where –?"

Doll crept to where he lay. She placed a hand on his arm and told him where he was. He stared up at her, barely able to make out the face from the last light of the lowering fire. "I was dreaming," he told her.

"It is a worthless thing to do," she said. Her words were harsh. It had been too long since she had allowed herself any gentle feeling. Habit was a stern master and she its servant in spite of herself.

"A second time you have saved me," Lank said, ignoring her comment. "I owe you twice my life."

"No," she whispered. "You owe me nothing. Not bartering glass, not your life."

"I will pay my debt to you." His gaze wandered to the fire. He stared at the few remaining feeble flames for a long time, saying nothing, and then, "If I had eaten in Randland, I would have died. You would not let me eat. If you had not come to the place of my Decoining, I would have died of starvation or fallen prey to marauding beasts as was the fate of all the others before me."

"Perhaps Murph watches over his own. Perhaps he wanted to have you live. I may have been only his instrument."

Lank's laugh was a bitter sound – an empty, scornful sound.

He said, "When first we met, I feared you."

"Because I did not Toss before trying to kill you."

"Just so."

"Neither did I Toss before saving you."

"I know. It is a strange thing."

"What thing is strange?"

"Knowing. Knowing what is good and what is evil. The two disguise themselves cleverly at times. They are brothers and only the very wise can always tell them apart."

"Not only the wise. Those who have had much experience with both brothers can also learn to tell the difference between them. But, as you say, good and evil are brothers. The same blood runs in the veins of each of them. It is no wonder then that they are sometimes unrecognizable."

"Tell me why you will not Toss."

Doll started to move away from him but Lank reached out and seized her arm. The movement brought a flash of pain to his chest. He released her and doubled over. She turned back to him and asked if she should heat the stones once again. He told her he did not want them now. He wanted now to know the answer to his question.

"It is not important."

"But it is. Few people rebel against the Clans. Few have the courage to live alone as you do. Few are willing to deny Murph and the ways of Afterit."

"I have little courage," Doll said, speaking quite softly. "It is not a matter of courage. Sometimes I think that the ones called courageous are merely the ones who sense a necessity and submit to it. I am, I guess, such a one."

"And what is it, this necessity of yours?"

"To believe in only what I can see and understand. To accept as real only that which I can touch or smell or hear. Murph has never shown himself to me. I have never touched him."

"But," Lank prodded, "you have heard him speak. In the temple and in Randland."

"I heard a voice. Eisen said it was Murph. Berg said it was Murph. I do not know."

"I think you want to believe."

"Yes, I do. When I was but a child. . . ."

"Go on."

"When I was a child, I went every week to the temple with the finest fruits I could find even though I wanted them for myself. I carried garlands of bluetree blossoms to lay before Murph. I listened to what I was told was his voice. But the years came and went away and when enough had vanished, I found I believed only in the baying of the wild dogs and the tearing teeth of the rats. I wondered why Murph permitted them to live, why he created creatures that killed. I asked questions. I was given no answers. Only frowns and an occasional kick. The ways of the Copper Clan are no longer mine."

"For years," Lank mused, "I longed to be a Coiner. At last, I became one. I thought of those years as a blessing. I told you I had never Lost a Toss. I thought Murph had smiled upon me and singled me out."

"It may be so. I cannot say nor should you listen to me. Each person walks alone in the end."

"Yes, and it is terrible. As terrible as any distorted thing

that leaps or flies in Afterit." Lank fell silent. When he spoke again, his voice was a dry branch creaking in the wind. "After I became a Coiner, I Lost."

"You survived."

"Yet I Lost more than you know."

His words puzzled Doll. She wanted to ask him what he meant but something in his voice made her refrain from phrasing the question.

"You want to believe," Lank said. "If you could, you would no longer be alone. I believed and. . . ."

"You no longer be –?"

"And now I am alone," he concluded, ignoring her interruption.

Doll said, "There are four of us now. A short time ago, I had only Hound Things change."

"They will change further. I will see to it." He reached out his hand and waited. A moment later, Doll placed her own in it. "Lie beside me," he sighed. "Warm me. It is night outside and the stars are cold. Will you lie beside me?"

Doll shifted her position and lay down beside him.

"Closer," he whispered. "I am so cold "

She moved closer to him and closed her eyes, unwilling to hope, able only to wait and see what would happen now that things had changed for her, perhaps irrevocably.

Across from them, Lincoln watched as Lank put his arm around Doll to draw her even closer to him.

In the months that followed, winter walked through the world. Gone now were the few blooms that had survived from Beforeit. Gone were the greasy leaves that grew on unblasted trees. Thin films of ice appeared overnight on the streams. In the ice lay ashes that grayed it and dulled its glitter. They sky was loud with crowds of birds protesting the season's sharp knives that slid between their feathers and sent them searching for a place where the sun was still

The pain in Lank's ribs diminished. It shrank from a searing agony when he moved to a faint annoying ache. His cuts had healed, leaving mounded soar tissue on his shoulders and calves. The purpled, nearly black bruises that had ornamented his body had disappeared like unpleasant memories.

He had removed the penitential thongs that had girdled his knees and identified him as a Coiner. But he had kept the Coin that Berg had given him in the pouch of his cheek. It was a link, a bond which he was not willing to sever. Doll had made him a shirt and leggings of goatskin which he wore with the woolly side against his skin and which warmed him in the days of frost and fire-huddling.

They sat more and more beside the fire that blazed continually now in the cavern. They ventured out only to hunt and they found the hunting hard. The goats, most of them, had gone away with the birds to some unknown place and would not return until the sun had once more learned to shout its warm signal and spread its hot breath upon the earth. They found burrows from which they extracted somnolent striped creatures and then they cracked their skulls against unyielding rocks. They even hunted the wild dogs and afterward pounded their meat with smooth stones to make it chewable.

The fire became the center of their lives. By its light, Lincoln painted his pictures on the cavern walls. Doll moved about it, preparing food, stitching skins together to form a covering for the cavern entrance through which the wind intruded, and simply sitting. Lank sat beside it too. For hours at a time, he would stare at the flames, his chin resting against his folded arms which in turn rested on his bent knees. At such times, he rarely spoke. When Lincoln would come to sit beside him and sing odd songs, Lank barely noticed him. When Doll announced that a stew was ready or that more wood was needed, he often had to be told a second and sometimes even a third time. In the fire, he built a new world. The flames were its towers. The rising smoke,

its shifting shape. But as the days passed, his world firmed and his plans grew solid.

He was sitting before the fire on the day they all heard the faint and faraway sound of cymbals.

Lincoln continued painting. But Doll stiffened and looked across at Lank. "The Toss," she said.

He didn't answer her.

She repeated her statement and added, "I told you days ago that it was almost time."

"The Toss," Lank repeated calmly.

"We had better go," Doll said. "They will be here soon. They know of this place."

"Hide," Lank murmured, his eyes still fastened on the flames, their light a gaudy glow on his stern features.

"Hide?"

"There is a place where no beater will look and where no voice will betray," Lank said, looking up at Doll. "I have thought about it – and many other things – all these long days since my Decoining."

"There is no such place," Doll insisted.

"There is. It is Randland."

The word brought fear to Doll's face. She shook her head.

Lank explained. "The beaters will never think to search in Randland for those who hide to avoid the Toss. We need not go down where the deadliness is We can shelter just inside the outer walls And then, when the Toss has taken place, we can leave and return here by circling around the base of High Hill. No one will know that we did not Toss."

"I am not afraid to Toss," Lincoln said, coming up and crouching beside Lank. "I always Win."

"It might work well for us," Doll said thoughtfully It is true, I think, that no beater will search Randland. No one goes near it unless he has Lost."

"Come, then," Lank said, rising.

Doll held out her hand to Lincoln and he took it. Together, they followed Lank outside where they found that a wet snow had begun to fall. Doll went back inside the

cavern and returned a few minutes later carrying skins which they used to wrap about their feet. When they had bound the skins securely, they set off in the direction of Randland.

The sound of the cymbals blended with the shouted curses of the beaters and the despairing cries of the clansmen as they were driven once more to the site of the Toss.

When they came within sight of Randland, Doll, despite her previous agreement with Lank that this would be a safe hiding place, stopped. When she did, so did Lincoln.

Lank looked back at them and beckoned them on.

Doll, after another brief moment of hesitation, tossed her head in a gesture of determination and moved forward with Lincoln beside her.

They made their way into the dread halls that were silent and empty. Once past the outer walls in which the glassless windows gaped, they stopped. Lank showed them where to hide. He pointed to an aperture in the wall where once a door had been. Doll and Lincoln stepped inside and looked about fearfully.

"When you hear the sound of the cymbals draw near," Lank told Doll, "then flee. Go around High Hill and double back to the cavern. Take care not to be seen."

"Where – where are you going?" Doll asked.

"I will meet you later at the cavern. You will be safe there and have no need of me."

Doll wanted to cry out to him and tell him that she did have need of him, of his strength, his determination, and his courage. She wanted to plead with him to stay and protect her and Lincoln. He mustn't leave them alone here – not here! But she saw the look on Lank's face and knew that he had made up his mind and knew as well that there was no unmaking of that mind. He would go. They would remain.

"Where are you going?" Doll asked him a second time, unwilling to let him disappear from her sight.

"I have plans. The Toss is the time when those plans must become actions. I will come to you again."

A moment later, he was gone.

"Have we lost?" Lincoln asked in a low voice, his face bereft. "Has he left us because we are Losers?"

"Sshhh," Doll answered. "Lank will come back to us."

"Lank is not the man who left us. Lank was not so hard. Lank laughed a lot."

"None of us are the same anymore. We change as do the seasons. Sometimes we even do not know ourselves."

Lincoln nestled against Doll and she began to stroke his forehead, listening for sounds that she did not want to hear, looking for sights that she knew she could not bear to see again. But she heard nothing, saw nothing.

An hour passed during which the wind hurled clusters of snowflakes into their hiding place through the vacant windows and doorless walls. The faint touch of the flakes was as chilling as their own thoughts. Randland waited with them.

And then the air received another burden to bear. No longer did it toss and twist only the snowflakes on its cold breath. Now it made room for the wails and the weeping of the people making their way toward Randland, sick with the unwritten sign of their destiny. The Losers were coming and Randland was ready for them.

Doll shook Lincoln who had been dozing against her shoulder. "Wake up. We must go now."

"I dreamed," Lincoln said after a huge yawn. "Rats nibbled Randland down to the ground. There was a festival to mark the passing of. . . ."

"*Sshhh!*" Doll said.

She led him out beyond the crumbling walls and then began to run with him as the sound of the Losers came closer and closer. She didn't stop running until she could no longer hear the dirge ringing out behind her. When she reached the distant side of High Hill, she slowed her pace and spoke reassuringly to Lincoln of their escape and of Lank's cleverness as they hurried on towards the cavern.

CHAPTER SIX

When Lank arrived at the temple, he circled it warily at first, peering through the trimmed hedges. He entered the courtyard only when he was convinced that all the Coiners and Berg as well were still at the site of the Toss.

Moving swiftly, he passed through the inner area of the temple and loped past Murph. When he was behind the large structure, he unlocked the door with his key and then searched until he found what he had been looking for. Berg had shown him how to work the machine. He experimented with it several times and soon had it running smoothly. The next step was more difficult. He spoke aloud several times, trying to hear the sound of his own voice as he imitated the inflections and lilting phrases that characterized Murph's own voice and speech. He set the machine and threw a switch. As the tape slowly unwound, he spoke again. He recited words he had heard Murph speak. He intoned instructions and made up commands. When he was satisfied, he flicked the switch to rewind the tape, set it for playback and listened critically.

It was not his normal voice he heard whispering on the tape. If it was not quite Murph's, it would nevertheless do since it was a reasonably successful imitation. He was ready to take his chances with it. He erased the tape and stood there, thinking. He had planned what he was about to do for some time. He had rehearsed the very words he would use. He knew the goal he was aiming for and that made the matter easier. It was a goal that part of him did not want to attain insofar as it admitted in a final and total way that Murph was indeed dead and the world – Lank's world of trust and a secure innocence – had also died. Well, he

would revive it. He began to speak. The tape inched away. His voice was thick with honey now; a moment later it was edged with anger.

He played his recording back and nodded to himself. It would do. At least, he hoped it would do. The risk he was taking was an enormous one. But, if he succeeded, it would be worth it. The world – the new world in which he had been floundering ever since his escape from Randland – would be relatively secure again and, if not filled with delight, at least beneficial to him and those he would choose to share his power.

He inserted the tape in the way that Berg had shown him after removing the one already there. Now he had only to wait.

The waiting was brief. Less than an hour after he had finished, Lank heard the Coiners returning. The sound of the song they were singing preceded them. He went out into the courtyard to meet them.

There they were, just coming up the path that led past the hedges. Berg was in the front of the long line with Jersey right behind him. Both men stopped the instant they saw Lank.

He stood his ground, saying nothing.

"Defiler!" Berg yelled. "Take him!"

Jersey began to move forward, an obedient dog who hears his master's voice and acts with no thought or objection. The other Coiners simply stood and stared, unable to understand Lank's presence before them. Had he not been Decoined? Was he not dead? How then could he stand here before them with that amused smile lifting his lips and brightening his eyes that were fixed upon them? It was all too perplexing and not a little bit frightening.

"Stay, Jersey!" Lank called out.

Jersey hesitated a moment and then continued his tense

"Cleanse the temple of this filth!" Berg roared, dancing about in agitation, urging the other Coiners forward.

"Berg!" Lank shouted. "Murph has held out his hand to me and led me in strange paths. I return to tell you of the wonders he has shown me and to hurl at you the truths he has whispered in my ear. Follow me!" Lank turned and headed for the inner area of the temple. As he did so, Jersey sprang and knocked him to his knees. Lank recovered quickly and threw his arms out and up. Once free of Jersey's grip, he turned and raised a foot and sent it flying His foot met Jersey's chest and Jersey bounced backward, his hands grasping his breast-bone, his body doubled over.

Lank went quickly inside and around behind Murph. He flicked a switch. He was standing before the face of Murph when the Coiners and the furious Berg appeared in the open doorway.

A faint humming brought the Coiners to their knees. It signaled that Murph was about to speak. Jersey edged inside, his eyes flicking from Berg to Lank. But when he heard the first words Murph spoke, he too dropped to his knees. Only Berg remained standing. Lank met his mentor's gaze with a bland and open expression.

Murph's voice drummed in the room. *"A devilish deed was the Decoining of my devoted hoyo, Lank of the Tribe of Five. A bad thing, oh, an evil thing. What dark dream did you have, Berg, that led you to such an awful act? Sure now, and you have served me well in your day, old man. But that day is ending and another newer one is dawning. Old men – you, Berg, like Eisen – must move out of the way so that younger hands might light my fires and feed me. Besides which, don't you know, you have done damage to one I would protect and cherish."*

"He blasphemed!" Berg cried out to the Coiners, knowing that Lank had engineered some trick and that there was no use speaking to a god who did not exist. "He deserved his Decoining."

The Coiners pressed their faces to the steel floor, quaking under the onslaught of Berg's wrath and Murph's words.

"You take tribute," Murph went on, *"when I have no*

need of it, Berg. As I think upon it, I believe you, like Eisen, deserve –"

Berg shouted a protest trying to drown out Murph's voice that was rising and rich with fury.

"Listen!" Lank shouted.

" - *Decoining!*" Murph raged. "*You, Berg, are the blasphemer. Not Lank. You sully my disciples and make foolish my ways.*"

"You have heard," Lank said when Murph fell silent. "Murph did not desire my death. Berg was jealous of me. He knew that Murph had smiled on me. He –"

"Lies!" Berg cried. "I will show you. All lies!" He ran to where Lank stood and was about to dart behind the bulky body of Murph when Lank seized him.

"It is a trick!" Berg shouted to the Coiners who had raised their heads and were staring in a mixture of wonder and horror at the scene taking place before them. "That was not Murph who spoke. It was –"

Lank let an expression of utter horror distort his features as he seized Berg and clapped a firm hand over his mouth. Holding Berg tightly so that he could not move, Lank spoke to the Coiners. "Did you not hear? Did you not hear this lowest of the beasts call Murph a liar? His touch revolts me and I fear I shall never be clean again. Decoin him as Murph has commanded!" He held Berg while two of the Coiners gagged him so that, as Lank had pointed out, he would be able to utter no more words that might bring the righteous wrath of Murph down upon all of them at once.

The attendants appeared and not long afterward rolled the Coin and its burden away and out of sight. Lank went behind Murph and speeded up the tape and then set it at normal speed. He returned to where the Coiners waited. Soon Murph's voice, calmer now, filled the temple

"*Eisen is gone from me. So is Berg. The ancient line is broken and I grieve for its passing. But no one lives forever and it is as it must be. Sad though I am, I am also glad. For there moves among you one whose true heart and strong*

shoulders I really treasure. Behold him! Behold Lank! Know you now that he will serve me well, as the children Iosen and Berg did not. He will make rich my harvests and gladden my heart that those ungrateful and evil ones have pierced. Hear him as you would hear me. I give him to you and demand that you see me as I live in him."

Lank stood with his head lowered. When the words ended, he dropped to his knees and forced tears from his eyes, his head leaning against Murph. He let one of the Coiners lift him and soothe him with reverent words. He said, "I did not choose this. Murph has chosen for me. I fear the burden he has placed upon my unworthy shoulders. **Coiners, help me!"**

They clustered about, praising Murph and congratulating Lank. Only Jersey stood apart. When Lank sent them away, **Jersey remained.**

He came up to Lank and said, "Do you suppose even gods catch the sickness in the throat that makes the voice **rough?"**

"It may be so," Lank said.

"Murph sounded strange to me. Did he not to you?"

"No. I form no questions where Murph is concerned. He speaks; I listen and obey."

"When it so well suits you, huh?"

"Jersey –"

Jersey raised his hands so that their palms faced Lank. "I wonder, that is all. I will not make myself a candidate for **Decoining."**

Lank turned and strode away from him into the comfortable quarters that had once belonged to Berg. He waited there until he heard the Coiners moving about outside and then he went out and called the newest of them to his side. He instructed the boy. He told him that Jersey must be watched because he teetered on the black brink of error. "Go," he told the boy, "and see that Jersey does not come to the aid of the Decoined Berg. If he does, Murph would have you -- stop him. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded eagerly. "I do."

When he had gone, Lank returned to what were now his relatively lavish quarters and let out a sigh of relief. It was over. No, not quite. But the boy would carry out the final part of his plan. He looked about him – at the skins of wine, the rich furs, the large bath that had been hollowed out of the earth and lined with evenly spaced slabs of stone. He smelled the scents that the women were accustomed to bring to sweeten the air surrounding Murph. He lay back on the bed of furs and thought about all he had gained through the cleverness of his brain and the determination of his will although he knew that he would willingly abandon all this if he could but return to that day not long ago when his beliefs were intact and the world was not so sere. He forced himself to acknowledge that that day was ended and would dawn no more. Now he had only the truth with which to live out his days. And if that truth were cold and lifeless, then he would find ways to warm it and make life – his life – not only bearable but on occasion joyous. He thought of Doll.

He was still thinking of her when the Coiner he had sent to the place of Berg's Decoining returned and announced that Murph had been right. Jersey had come and tried to free the badly injured Berg.

"Murph sees all," Lank murmured. "It is as he suspected. Now we must hunt them down and work Murph's will upon them."

"No," the boy protested. "They lie lifeless at the bottom of High Hill." He placed his hand upon the hilt of the knife that was tucked into the thong bound about his thigh.

Lank saw the red slime that still trickled from the blade and slid down the boy's white flesh.

"Already the great birds have swooped down. Their feasting will last through the night."

"Then it is over." Lank paused and then clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "There are but ten Coiners now. I would that the next two, when they are appointed to replace

me and Jersey, prove to be not unlike you." Then Lank sent the boy away with Murph's blessings. It was indeed over, he thought, when the boy had disappeared. And, equally true, it was all just beginning. He refused to think about what was lost and ended. As he reached for the fat skin full of wine by his side, he told himself that victors did not mourn.

The Coiner who came to Doll told her that Lank had sent him. He told her that Lank was waiting for her at the temple of Murph and that she and Lincoln were to come to him at once. He would guide her there. Doll sent him away, saying that she knew the way.

When the Coiner had gone, she went to the stream and broke the thin sheet of ice that covered it She dipped water from it, using a stone vessel which she carried back to the cavern and placed over the fire. Then she proceeded to wash herself with the warmed water after sending Lincoln from the cavern. She rubbed herself briskly with a ragged cloth. The cold gnawed at her but the rubbing she gave herself seemed to heat her blood.

Certain questions had occurred to her but she had elected not to ask them of the Coiner who had brought her Lank's message. She wondered how Lank could be at the temple once again after having been ritually Decoined. Perhaps, she speculated, Berg had had a change of heart. Or perhaps Lank had convinced Berg that his Decoining had been a mistake. Doll didn't particularly like the idea of confronting Berg again. There was something about the man that made her shudder. She wondered why Lank had not come to her himself Why had he sent a messenger? She would have preferred it if he had appeared at the mouth of the cavern, called her name, held out his strong arms into which she would have moved and. . . .

But her questions, she guessed, would be answered in time. The important thing was that Lank had kept his promise to her. As she wrapped the thick goatskin about

her body again, she felt a thrill course through her. She admitted to herself now that she had had her doubts about Lank. When he had left her alone with Lincoln in the outer corridors of Randland, she had been afraid to see him go. She admitted now that she had not been sure that she would see him again. A foolish thought, she realized. A thought whose outlines were etched by the knife of her own inner fears. She began to hum to herself as she remembered Lank's gratitude for her action in Randland when they had been Losers together. It was then that something had changed within him. He had been like a child who suddenly realizes that someone he hardly knew cared about him and about what happened to him. His graceless but tender gesture outside Randland had been the beginning of a bond between them. She herself could not account for the action she had taken. When she had first met Lank in the Place of Pits, he was nothing more than another marauder who would use her and go his way. And she had known enough marauders. She had built her barricades behind which she hid from them. But Lank had Lost and in the Losing had become another man. She didn't understand it at all. She was simply glad that it had happened.

She called to Lincoln who came into the cavern and she told him to wash himself. As he did so, she ran her fingers through her long hair and shook it out several times. She tied it at the nape of her neck. She had cared little about her appearance since the day she had been driven from the Copper Clan. She had cared only about her survival, a much more important matter. But now, somewhat amused at the feelings that were stirring within her, she went to where Lincoln's paints were lying in their little bowls and dipped an index finger into the reddest of them and touched the tip of her finger to each of her cheeks. She swirled the paint on them and then went running from the cavern down to the bank of the ice-laden stream where she leaned over and peered down at her reflection. She put her hand into the cold water and washed some of the paint away. When she

was satisfied with her efforts, she returned to the cavern, her cheeks now bearing a faint pink blush.

Hound raised his sleepy head as she came in.

She hesitated. Lank's message had said nothing of Hound. But surely he would not mind if she took the dog with her. He was no longer wild and if she abandoned him now, he would not know how to hunt in the wilderness. He would die of starvation or fall prey to his less civilized and ever-hungry fellows. She bent down and patted the dog. He rolled over on his back and gave an upside-down yawn.

"Why do we leave here?"

Doll rose at the sound of Lincoln's voice. "Because Lank has sent for us. We will go to him."

"But," Lincoln protested, "you said he was Decoined."

"Yes, I did."

"So he is dead!"

"No, you saw him here yourself. He is as alive as you and I."

Lincoln shook his head. "Not Lank. Not the Lank of our sliding. I heard the man who was here talking to spirits while he slept. He cursed Murph. Lank would not have done that."

Doll knew that Lincoln no longer perceived the truth clearly But, at the same time, she knew that there was something about what he said that touched some secret kernel of knowledge that lay without sprouting within her. She did not really know Lank well. Why then did she sense that in some strangely perceptive way Lincoln had spoken the truth?

"I would rather stay here – with you," Lincoln was saying.

Doll roused herself from the quicksand of her thoughts. "You will be more comfortable at the temple. There will always be enough food. And wine " She reached over and took his chin in her hand and raised his face so that he was loking into her eyes. "And women who never say no to a man as beautiful as you are."

"I want no other woman."

The words lay heavy in the air between them. Doll had known it. She had become aware some time ago of the way he watched her moving about the cavern. She had felt his touch in the night and had moved away from it and he had done nothing more. She was a woman though and she knew. Lincoln's mind might wander unmoored but the male messages that his body transmitted to him could not be denied.

"Perhaps Lank will take you sliding again," she said lightly. "Perhaps he will give you a new Coin."

"I will go if you go," came Lincoln's reply. "I would not be away from you. But. . . ."

"Come then. We have miles to travel."

He held his hand out to her and she took it with only the barest hesitation. As they left the cavern, Doll called Hound and he came bounding out and romped ahead of them as they started their journey. It was a journey from a world that had been, she now admitted to herself, lonely and filled with threats to another world as yet unknown but rich with possibilities, one of which was love.

Doll set a quick pace which Lincoln, with a trace of reluctance, matched. It took them only a short time to reach the temple. When they sighted it, they halted. Doll released Lincoln's hand and stared at the gleaming structure that was so unlike the smashed buildings and rotting hulks of what had once been houses. It seemed to her to glow with promise.

"Randland," Lincoln murmured.

"No," Doll corrected. "It is the temple where once you were a Coiner."

"Randland," Lincoln insisted. "It is different only on the outside."

Doll moved away from him and his foolishness. Now was not the time to listen to his rantings. Now was the time for her to move forward with confidence and hope. As she

entered the courtyard, the Coiners who were trimming the hedges looked up.

"I am Doll," she told them in a voice she hoped was steady. "Lank has sent for me and I am here."

One of the Coiners dropped the honed blade he had been holding and went into the temple. Doll and Lincoln waited while the other Coiners continued their snipping and slicing in silence.

A moment later, the first Coiner appeared in the doorway and beckoned. "Lank bids you come to him." He led them into the inner area, past the lighted and muttering bulk of Murph which caused momentary skittishness in Lincoln, and into the private sanctuary that had once been Eisen's and Berg's and was now Lank's. The Coiner discreetly withdrew.

Lank was standing in the center of the room with his back to them. At the sound of their entrance, he turned around and said, "Murph welcomes you as do I." He lifted a wineskin and began to pour a dark red liquid into two goblets that obviously had survived from the era of Before-

it. He held them out to Doll and Lincoln.

Doll drank. Lincoln did not. Hound walked about the room, sniffing and snorting.

"You sent for us," Doll said.

"I did. And now you have come. It will be good. How is it with you, Lincoln? Do you still dream of waterfalls?"

"What name do you give yourself?" Lincoln asked.

Lank laughed. "I bear the name my parents gave me. You know it well."

"I will call you Noman."

"As you please." Lank turned to Doll, took her arm and drew her from Lincoln. "He still lies dreaming in some land other than this one. You would have him here?"

"I would. I thought –"

"You thought since I sent for him as well as for you that I had need of him. Or perhaps that I wanted him here.

Neither is true. But here he may stay if that is what you wish."

"There is no other place for him to go."

"The cavern."

"He is not a good hunter. He paints. That is all."

"Then he can share a cubicle with a Coiner. He was one of them once. Maybe he will be again when the clouds leave his sky."

Lank called a name and a Coiner appeared. Following Lank's order's, he led Lincoln from the room.

"Where is Berg?" Doll asked.

"Dead. Murph Decoined him."

"How is it that they have taken you back into the temple?"

"Murph spoke and named my name. He ordered Berg's Decoining as punishment for his attempt to destroy me. I, as Murph has willed it, now take the place of the descendants of Eisenberg. For that reason, you need have no fear of this place or of the Coiners. They do my bidding now. You are safe here."

"I still have my Coin. But Lincoln, as you know, has none."

Lank gave a brief laugh and poured wine for himself. "The moon will not fatten fully for many days yet. We will talk of Coins when that time comes." He drank deeply and sat down on a chair that was dusty but solid.

Doll looked around the room and saw that it was filled with Beforeit objects. Besides the chair and the small table and the goblets, there were metal ornaments on the walls and heavy draperies covering the windows. No clan possessed so many treasures, she knew. It would have taken many sacks of bartering glass to accumulate such wealth.

"All this," Lank said, watching her as she stared amazed at her surroundings, "is yours to share with me if you so choose."

Without quite realizing what she was doing, Doll fingered the Coin resting in the cavity of her ear.

"You will not need your Coin here. You have only to decide what you will do as you have often done in the past. You can choose all this." Lank waved his hand in a gesture which encompassed not only the room and its contents but much more. "Since Randland – even before, as you know – I wanted you. I want you more now."

"Then it is you I choose," Doll said. "Not this. You."

He came over to her and took the goblet from her hand and set it down on the table. "I am glad you came," he whispered as he put his arms around her.

"I am glad you sent for me," she said, leaning her head against his chest, her ear recording the beating of his heart.

He put his hands on her shoulders and eased her away from him. She stood there quietly as his fingers found the thongs that bound her garments. Deftly he untied them. When she was clothed only in her soft skin, he began to undo his own clothing. Soon he stood naked and muscular inches away from her.

They came together and then dropped down softly on the furs which muffled the moans they emitted as they eagerly fitted themselves to one another.

When at last all their fires had been banked, they lay side by side without speaking. And then Lank raised his head slightly and propped himself up on one elbow. He looked down at Doll who lay beside him with her eyes closed. He traced the cupped curve of her breasts with one finger and saw her body grow momentarily taut and her lips part.

"Lincoln was right," she sighed, her eyes still closed.

"Right?"

"He said you were not the same man he knew. You are not the same man I knew. The man who threw me down in the Place of Pits has gone away."

"I am here."

Doll opened her eyes and looked up at him. She raised a hand and placed it against his cheek. "I like this man whose touch is gentle and whose words are kind. That other man,

the one you were, was empty."

Lank threw himself down on his back. "That other man was full of the ways of Afterit. This one that lies beside you [illegible]"

"Lank, what is wrong? Am I not –?"

"You are all that a woman should be," he interrupted. "You are warm and soft and sweeter than the sap from the baybushes."

"Then why do you frown? Why do you talk of thieves? Who are they and what have they stolen from you?"

Lank got up without answering and dressed. Just before he left the room, he said, "Forget what has been. Think of what will be. You and I will be our own Clan now. The rest of the Survives will know us when we walk among them, I promise you."

Doll lay quietly after he had gone, aware of a coolness in the air. She wrapped the furs about her and wondered why they seemed to hold no real warmth.

In the days that followed, Lank spent many hours with the Coiners. He taught them to read the messages in the tapes that Murph spewed forth and he made them listen with care to Murph's words that he himself had regulated and, in some cases, altered. He learned by experimentation how to subtly change some of the tapes so that Murph's words sometimes broke off, leaving spaces of silence except for a faint wheezing or a shrill moment of static. When the Coiners would look up in alarm, Lank would nervously reassure them that Murph was well and that there was nothing to fear. He saw the expressions of alarm on the faces of some of the men and later he heard the whispers and the threads of rumor that began to snake through the temple.

He made Murph ready for Tribute Day. The tape he had recorded lay waiting. The people filed into the courtyard and took their places. Lank had arranged for the huge wooden Coin to be placed at the side of the temple entrance. It rested there, silent and ominous.

He came out of the temple and greeted the people. "As it was Beforeit, is not now and never ever shall be again!"

The people repeated the formal greeting and, following Lank, filed into the temple one by one to present their Tribute.

The women and girls who were the Tribute this time displayed various attitudes. Some were shaken; others wore expressions of a cautious pride.

Lank, with the Coiners ranked behind him, chose those who were acceptable to Murph and sent the others away. The families of those rejected were admonished by the Coiners to return with suitable Tribute and to take care not to offend Murph again with inferior offerings.

During the presentation of Tribute, Murph chose to speak. Lank was not present when the first words rumbled out of the metallic housing but he appeared a moment later, having flicked the switch that turned on the tape he had prepared.

The people huddled together in anticipation.

"*Survives! Attend to me! I grow weary of your mewling and your miseries. I sicken at the sight of the withered witches you bring to me, the filthy fruits and the rest of the garbage you dare deem fit tribute for me.*

"*It is a dark day, this. It is a day you maggots will long remember. Too long have I borne your insults. Too long have I tolerated your indifference. There is a new wind blowing and it will clean my house and make strong my minions. Coiners, attend to me!*"

The men turned to stare at Murph, rigid and attentive.

Lank took his place beside them, his head bowed, his hands folded in front of him.

Doll, who had been standing with Lincoln near the open door, shuddered. Lincoln moved closer to her.

"*Coiners,*" Murph repeated, "*you are the Chosen this lunar year. Will you serve me well?*"

Lank answered for them. "They will and eagerly."

"*I appoint you guardians of Afterit. No more will I per-*

mit the people to walk shoddily through my days. No more will I permit the sloppiness now present in Coindom. Coiners, you will move among the people and enforce my will. My wishes shall be delivered to you through my servant, Lank."

Lank looked up quickly as if in surprise and then down again.

Murph went on. *"I will deign to speak no more to any Survive. But I will have my ways observed. Lank, hear me."*

"I hear you."

"Confiscate every Coin!"

A disturbed murmuring swept through the crowd. Several people fingered their Coins nervously.

"It is your Coin, Lank, and yours alone, that will decree for all from this moment on. I place a heavy burden on your young shoulders but it is a burden I know you will accept. Will you not, now?"

"I will." Lank's voice was distinctly audible in the hush.

"It is good. It is over. I speak no more. Lank, you will speak for me now."

Slowly, Lank turned to the assembled crowd. He hesitated and then said with what seemed to be genuine difficulty, "You have heard Murph."

Heads nodded and voices murmured assent.

"I will accept your Coins."

No one moved.

Lank held out his hand to the nearest of the Coiners and the man promptly dropped his silver Coin in it. The others then did the same. When he had collected them all, Lank turned again to the people. He gestured to the Coiners. "Take them from the others as Murph has commanded," he ordered, a sharpness in his tone.

The Coiners moved among the people. Some of the people surrendered their Coins eagerly. Others drew back as the Coiners approached them and had their Coins forcibly taken from them.

Lank watched the brief ceremony with carefully con-

cealed pleasure. When it was over, he addressed the people again.

"This Coin will now decide for us all." He held up the Ten that Berg had given him, careful to show only one of its faces to the people. "Murph has so decided. Go now to your Clans and tell of what has happened here. Appoint one man from each Clan to gather the remaining Coins and bring them here where the Coiners will accept them. Each morning at this same hour, you will send one of your Clansmen here to the temple and I will Toss and tell you what it is that must be done that day. I beg you to help me bear this burden that Murph has placed upon me. In his wisdom, he has decided. I can do nothing but obey. It must be the same for you. Go now."

As if released from some invisible net, the people hurried from the temple and soon were out of sight.

Doll left Lincoln's side and came up to Lank. "One Coin," she said softly. "Yours. May Murph guide its path."

"He will," Lank said.

Doll held out her hand to him.

He looked at her closed fist, puzzled.

"My Coin," she said. "Take it."

He took it from her and handed it to the Coiner standing beside him.

"Now only you are Coined," Doll observed.

"Only me," he agreed. And then he turned and strode past Murph on his way to his quarters.

Thoughtfully, Doll watched him go. She felt a growing sense of uneasiness that was the direct result of the scene that had just taken place. The feeling grew until it began to take on the haunted countenance of fear. And yet, she told herself, there was no real or discernible cause for fear. She had long wanted to be free of her Coin and all that it implied. And that freedom was now hers. But instead of welcoming it she almost wished to deny it. She knew that her feelings were in part based on Lank's behavior. There was something unpleasant, she decided, about the way he had

accepted the Coins which the people had surrendered. His face had been almost expressionless. But not totally so. Doll had seen the satisfied lift of his lips at one point when the confiscation had been consummated. The not-quite smile had vanished almost at once but it had been there; she had seen it.

One Coin. Lank's One only which could declare how the lives of clansmen throughout the world of Afterit were to be lived. One that could – she failed to push the thought away – one that could even designate who would live and who would die. It began to seem to her that one Coin might bode as much ill as a thousand turning and twisting in the Afterit air.

But the one Coin that remained was Lank's. And that fact, she believed, would make a difference. The Choices he would make with it would not be evil. Lank was not Berg, not Eisen. But, she asked herself, who is he? She had to admit to herself that she really did not know.

The silence of Murph resounded from the top of High Hill. It roared down through the scarred expanse of the Place of Pits and echoed in the emptiness of Lost Valley. The people found themselves listening for Murph's familiar clicking and occasional sighing that had been so intimate a part of their lives and when it came to them no more they were at first appalled, then resigned, and after several weeks had passed, almost pleased.

Because if Murph spoke no more, his disciple Lank spoke for him and there was a sense of relief among the people because Lank could be touched – although no one dared to do so – and he could be seen moving among the Coiners or walking with the woman he had chosen at his [illegible]

He is like us, the people said. In his lungs is our air Beneath the bony orb of his skull lie thoughts not unlike ours. And he has a heart that can be broken as easily as can any of ours.

As the days marched by in single file, the people gradually stopped listening for Murph. They felt the link that was Lank bind together their thoughts and hopes and desires. They were almost content in the new and stunning silence.

Each morning found the representatives of the Clans assembled in the courtyard of the temple. Each morning they stood before Lank and he asked them what it was that stirred or troubled them.

One day it would be a question of whether to plant or not. Up would go Lank's Coin. Up too would rise his voice to call at random either Heads or Tails.

The Clan members would plant.

Perhaps another day they would not.

They would tell Lank how a toddler had somehow disappeared from the children's corral and ask if they should search for the missing one or remain bereft behind their walls.

Lank's Ten would tell them.

Some of the people grumbled. Some said that the new system of a single deciding Coin was both inconvenient and wrong. Surlier Clansmen suggested that perhaps Murph was mad to invest his power in a lone man, a single Coin.

When Lank heard these grumblings which were duly reported to him by his Coiners who swam like fish in the ocean of Afterit, he did not ignore them. Instead, one morning at the usual gathering of elders, he pleaded for one among them to relieve him of his burden. He spoke of how sleepless were many of his nights because of Murph's demands. But not one of the members of the crowd was willing to exchange places with him. They neither wished to nor dared to. They would instead plod along bearing their own burdens, unwilling to exchange them for one as awesome as Lank's which, as he had hinted, bore features that none of them even wished to guess at, let alone know.

When the news of Lank's cry for relief from his appointed task spread throughout the Clans, the grumbling grew less, and the few who still sought to stir up trouble

were either ignored or advised to stop their complaints and instead go to Lank and take from him as their own the invisible mantle that Murph had placed upon him.

But the grumbling began again on a morning that dawned pink and gold and was bedecked by an errant flock of brown birds which appeared without warning and screeched and chattered in the bare branches – an omen of evil, some whispered. Lank stood that morning in his accustomed place, his Coin resting on the back of his hand and announced, "Murph would have more men about to serve him – and all of you as well. He would have twenty-four Coiners standing stalwart at his side. Recruiting has already begun among the devout and sturdy of sinew. To feed them, to clothe them, to sustain them in their service – all this will require tribute. Therefore, your individual contributions will increase five-fold on the next Tribute Day."

It was Raymond of the Copper Clan who protested, his voice companionless. "Lank, it is not possible. Even now, many of the children in the corral have big bellies which tell of their hunger. The land is barren nearly everywhere and that which still yields its benefits does so with reluctance. We cannot increase Tribute."

"You must," Lank said, a practiced sadness threading his tone.

"Could you not reduce the number of Coiners instead?"

Lank sighed and raised his head. Without looking at Raymond, he replied, "Who dares deny Murph?"

On the next Tribute Day, the Clansmen, as they had been ordered, increased their offerings five-fold. Raymond stood among them. He said nothing during the ceremony but he had brought with him two of his grandchildren from the corral and he kept them in sight by his side where their gaunt faces and bare bulging bellies silently indicated Lank's changed system but allowed Raymond to avoid the risk of uttering dangerous words that he well knew might lead to his Decoining.

At the end of the ceremony, Lank remained in the inner area of the temple as the Clansmen departed. When they were all gone, he unlocked the door behind Murph and inserted the tape he had made the day before and turned it on. Then he ran from the temple and called out to the disappearing Clansmen that Murph had broken his vow of silence and was about to speak.

"Come with me and hear him," he called out to the men and women.

They followed him back into the temple and clustered together in small uneasy groups as Lank's imitation of Murph's voice sidled softly into the room.

"Ah, but you Survives are a goodly lot and a generous one too. I know that Lank has told you of my wishes and of my gratitude for your obedience but I would repeat it – and speak too of other related matters. And so I say it to you now. I thank you for your Tribute. But words – ah, they be a bit too weak to convey my pleasure. So said I to Lank. And he said to me: 'Murph, the people live in fear and trembling. They pace their little lives from one Toss to the next. Their sorry years are each studded with two terrors. Two Tosses.' Aha, says I to him. That's jolly well the way it should be, don't you know. I won't be having the ways of Beforeit back again. No sirree, you can bet your asses on that, me boyos. So doesn't this Lank then pull himself up like an overgrown and towering bluetree and insist that there is not a chance in Afterit that the old and awful ways would ever return now. He tells me, does this brave upstart, that all of you Survives deserve a – what the hell did you call it, Lank, me boy?"

"A respite." Lank answered in a low tone.

"Ah, so it was. Yes, it was that. A respite. He wanted to eliminate the Toss! He wanted to end your penitential journeys to Randland! By Coins, let me tell you I refused and mightily! I argued. I told him that he must call you Survives together and he must Toss for each one of you. His Coin would declare which of you would Win and which

would Lose. He argued then. Oh, didn't he just! I shouted at him as only I with my great gusto can shout. But to no avail, alas! The boy touched my heart. I agreed."

A murmuring rose up among the Survives and evolved instantly into cries of joy.

"*Ah, but now hold on there!*" Murph roared. "*A respite it is only. No Toss this half-year. None the next if you continue to avoid the errors of Beforeit. If you do not, if you will not – you will Toss again. But for now, I will let Lank's wish prevail.*"

Lank found himself surrounded by the happy throng when Murph was once again silent. He accepted their gratitude but claimed it was not really due him since he had done only what he considered to be the right thing. He cautioned the people about error, reminding them of Murph's capacity for vengeance. He felt, he said, that since he had recommended the cessation of the Toss, that he was responsible to see to it that the people did not grow lax. He would therefore station a Coiner among each of the Clans whose duties would be to watch, to listen, and to report any infidelity that might lead to a rebirth of Beforeit. He was, he explained, doing this for the safety and well-being of all the people. He hoped they understood that. They promptly assured him that they definitely did.

Later, when the last of the crowd had disappeared, Lank exulted within himself at his victory. For victory it was. His first victory had been his successful scheme for replacing Murph. Berg had unwittingly pointed the way toward that triumph by revealing how the tapes were used and how they could be altered or even created. Lank smiled to himself as he thought Berg's cleverness had had its limits. Berg had merely unimaginatively propagated an existing system. Lank intended to refine and magnify that same system. His offer to relinquish the position and power that had been thrust upon him had been his next calculated move, admittedly a gamble. But it had paid off. No one had been willing to replace him. Next, the increased tribute

which would assure him of a secure and relatively easy life in a harsh and dangerous world. He had known that action of his would cause dissent. But he had countered that dissent with this, his latest maneuver – the elimination of the Toss. And the fools had believed it all. They obviously believed that he had actually so counseled Murph and that Murph had spoken to them and agreed to the proposed change. Their gratitude was a weapon Lank knew he could and would use against them. They were, in their relief over the possibility of no more Tossing, already weakened and they did not know it. He would be their protector now. After all, was he not the one who had saved them from a horror that haunted their lives, asleep or awake? Their dependence upon him would increase. He would see to it.

He laughed and leaned back against the impotent mechanism that was Murph, the mechanism that was his to do with as he chose. As he *Chose*! His laughter grew louder as he gloried in his triumph and as he thought of how his life seemed to be opening, before him, rich with as yet unthought of possibilities. But as his laughter diminished, there hid within it an anguished note of some other emotion that might have been sorrow. The cracked sound that ended his laughter might have been a suppressed lament for bright hopes and beliefs once whole but now broken and beyond repair. But there was no returning to the lamb that he now knew himself once to have been. That trusting lamb had walked in terrible forests where dark magics had been worked upon it so that it had emerged as a cunning wolf which cared now for nothing but its own paths and hungers, having been forced to renounce the foolish joys of lambhood.

It was this wild yet stricken cry of the wolf that Doll heard in Lank's laughter as she hurried into the temple in search of him.

"Lank!" she cried. "They say that –" She stopped when she saw the sudden alteration of his expression. It had changed from what struck her as a tormented mask to one

of an easy blandness and interest in whatever it was that she had been about to say.

"What is it, Doll?"

"I met Raymond. He told me that none of us will ever have to Toss again. I never knew him to lie before."

"He did not lie. Murph has spoken and what Raymond said is so. Did he not tell you what happened here?"

"He did but I did not believe him."

"I too tell you it is so. And now, gather up whatever tribute pleases you and come with me. I have need of you."

Doll looked down at the floor where wineskins lolled like udders sundered from enormous cows. Beforeit artifacts lay sprinkled about – a cracked and gilded mirror, a tricycle with one wheel missing, a fragment of canvas on which a painted woman appeared whose face bore a faint relic of a smile, sparkling bits of bartering glass, haunches of smoked and dried dog.

Lank gestured impatiently. "Take what you will. The reddest of the bartering glass should suit you." He bent and picked up a heavy wineskin and walked around Murph.

Doll selected a single piece of green glass and began to follow Lank. As she entered his quarters, she saw his foot rise and fly. She flinched as Hound, who had been lying asleep on the furs, yelped and scrambled away from Lank's anger.

"Lank, don't!" Doll cried.

The dog ran from the room, dodging the cracked piece of pewter that Lank flung at him, his whine rising to a keen pitch and then slowly fading away.

"Why?" Doll stood in the doorway, staring at Lank. "Why?" she repeated, unable to understand what appeared to her to be his senseless and unmotivated act.

Instead of answering her, Lank opened the wineskin and raised it to his lips. He squeezed it as he drank deeply. Some of the purple liquid escaped his lips and gullied down his bare chest.

Doll turned to go.

Lank called out to her and pointed to the furs. When she hesitated, he spoke again, more gently this time. "Stay with me. I am sick to death of Coiners and Survives and the service of Murph. I would listen to you sing songs for me. I would watch you dance dances capable of making a man's blood unfreeze. Tell me lies, Doll." He raised the wineskin and drank again, nearly draining it this time.

"Lies, Lank? What lies can I tell you?"

He flopped down onto the furs and patted them, indicating to Doll that she was to come and sit beside him. She crossed the room in the opposite direction and sat down on a backless chair.

He said. "Tell me that Afterit is better than Beforeit. Tell me that joys are to be found on the plain in thick packs and that they can be netted by any man clever enough to see them when they run through the moonlight on hooves of flowers."

Doll said, "There once was a man who had harvested twenty sets of seasons. His Coin turned often in the air. There came a girl who had been forced too soon into the ways of a woman. The man. The Coin. The girl disguised as a woman."

"No! No more!"

Doll ignored his protests. She was not looking at him. But she could hear the low gurgling as he drank again. "Where there was no love, there could be killing. Time passed. The man and the woman Lost. And in Randland, the woman slept while something happened to the man. Afterward, the man drove all thoughts of killing from the woman's mind. They touched. They came together again and this time sweet and tender juices flowed to ease their joining. This time. . . ."

"Enough! I ask for lies and you give me truth! I want no more truth. It is lies I need. Doll, I need . . .!"

"What happened in Randland, Lank? What happened there while I slept?"

Lank sprang to his feet and threw the wineskin against the wall. He turned and strode across the room, his face twisted with an expression of pain. He seized Doll's wrist and pulled her to her feet. He drew her close to him and held her with one arm while the hand of his free arm ripped away her upper garment and found her breasts.

She cried out at the brutality of his touch but her cry was cut short as his mouth came down roughly upon hers. She twisted her head and tried to free herself but failed.

At last, he drew away without releasing his hold on her. She was about to speak but before she could, he pushed her down on the furs. As he did so, he stumbled against the chair on which she had been sitting. Recovering his balance, he lurched toward her and dropped down beside her.

"Randland, Lank," she prompted. "What happened to you in –?"

He struck the side of her face with his fist.

Her vision blurred and then grew bright with colorful flashes of light that grew and burst and grew again. And then, when she realized what was happening to her, she made no further outcry. Her hair half covered her face and Lank's shoulder pressed against it as his hand groped blindly between her thighs. She adjusted her legs in a gesture more of despair than of defeat and he bluntly thrust himself inside her.

"– love you," he muttered through clenched teeth.

Doll made an effort to respond to him but it was impossible. He pinioned her below him in a thoughtless and brutal way. She was impaled beneath his body and there was no way for her to share the passions that tore through him and which, in a sad and desperate way, outraged her because they cared nothing for what pain or pleasure she might be feeling.

His sweat lay wet on the skin of her face while pain lay nestled in her pelvis. He forced open her mouth and covered it with the furnace of his own. And then, as a vio-

lent shudder ran through him and he plunged deeper within her, he began to mutter almost incoherently.

"As it was Beforeit, is not now and never ever shall be again!" He groaned and stopped moving. "That door. That door that led me to doom! To Murph's white bones . . . to Rand Corp. . . . to the death of gods and demons alike. Murph has poisoned me."

Doll, frightened, whispered, "I would not let you eat in Randland."

Lank coughed and drew away from her.

Doll hesitated. But she had to know. She would never find a cure if she could not name the sickness that obviously afflicted Lank. "I would let you eat nothing in Randland," she repeated as loudly as she dared.

Lank's dry lips opened and his head rolled to one side. "I ate. I ate – truth – in Randland and I am poisoned." His hands groped for his face, found it and covered it as he curled up and lay on his side, his knees to his chin.

Doll lay listening to his snores that shattered the quiet a little later. She was afraid to touch him. She was afraid that, if she touched him, his pain would be added to her own and she could bear no more pain at the moment. At last she sat up, filled with pity for him and, in a lesser way, for herself. Lank lay stiffly on the furs, his face hidden behind his hands. His spine was a raised bony ridge beneath the flesh of his back.

Doll got up and put on her clothes. She crept noiselessly from the room and went and stood in front of Murph. Although she felt the familiar terror of the unknown as she stood there, she nevertheless spoke aloud, without defiance but with determination. "I will not let you hurt him anymore," she told Murph. And then she went out into the night that had once again routed the day and began to move slowly but steadily away from the temple toward Randland. She had not gone more than a few yards when she paused, her courage dissipating. She was about to return to the temple when she saw Hound, a furred

blur in the darkness, crouched beneath the nearby hedges.

The sight of the dog's eyes burning in the gloom and the sound of his tail thwacking the ground as she approached reminded her of the vicious kick Lank had given him earlier. "Hound," she whispered softly. The dog got up and came to her. "We'll find Lincoln," she said, "and then we will all go and seek the truth that has sickened Lank."

Hound followed her back to the temple. She called Lincoln's name softly at the entrance to the cubicle he shared with one of the Coiners. When he crawled out, sleep slowing his movements, she told him that she was going on a journey and asked if he wanted to accompany her. He nodded his head eagerly and rubbed his eyes.

The three of them went outside and began the journey that Doll confessed to herself she was too cowardly to make alone. She tried not to think that she might be endangering both Lincoln and Hound as well as herself. She knew only that she needed them by her side because she had too little courage to return to Randland alone.

Lincoln wanted to know where they were going. Doll told him he must be quiet. She didn't want to answer his question. Somehow she did not want to speak the words that would define their destination; it would make it all too real, and therefore even more frightening. Hound walked beside Doll instead of bounding ahead as was his usual custom. He seemed to sense that this was a journey requiring a sober approach and a wary walk.

When Randland loomed before them, a dark stain on the dark night, Lincoln moaned and drew back. "No," he murmured, shaking his head. "You said I was a Winner."

Doll gripped his hand. "If you do not want to come with me, then stay outside and wait."

Lincoln studied her face that was being washed with the pale light of the moon. "I won't let you go – there. You are not a Loser."

After an only partially successful attempt at explanation, Doll made her determined way alone toward the gaping

ruin. She had not been able to argue convincingly with Lincoln because a part of her did not dare urge him to take the risk she was forcing herself to take.

As she entered the opening where once a door had been, she heard Lincoln call her name. She paused, looked back, and saw him running toward her with Hound at his side. When he reached her, he said, "The night is as fearful as Randland. I will go with you."

When they arrived at the crude stairs that studded the side of the deep shaft, Lincoln picked up Hound and started down. Doll followed him.

Lights glowed on the lower level. The faint hum of suction vents invaded their ears. Doll moved forward as Lincoln set Hound down upon the floor. The dog began to bark as Doll passed through the door and the mechanism she could not see sprang into automated life.

"*Come Coinless!*" a voice boomed.

Doll felt hope surge through her. She was Coinless. She stepped forward.

The voice continued its familiar litany. It demanded that the Survives choose. Doll looked about the room not knowing what she was searching for knowing only that here must lie the beginning of Lank's anguish that had become so apparent to her.

The panel of buttons burst from the wall.

Doll knew better than to touch them. She moved about the room feeling the walls, glancing up at the ceiling which glowed brightly. She searched it carefully but found nothing. She returned to the room where the colored buttons gleamed innocently in the wall. She looked down and saw what at first she mistook for another button near the floor. She moved close and saw that it was not a button but some sort of stain. She knelt down and gingerly examined it.

She touched and discovered the sharp piece of metal jutting out of its center. She drew back and then noticed the crack in the wall at the point where it met the floor. She

took her knife from her waistband and inserted the tip of the blade in the crack and twisted it.

Nothing happened. She bent the blade upward, careful not to exert too much pressure which would cause the blade to snap.

The panel suddenly swung open. She lost her balance and fell. Lying on her chest, her palms pressed against the floor, she stared into the revealed room which looked like a smaller version of Murph's temple.

"Doll!" Lincoln shouted in alarm.

She got to her knees. "I'm all right."

He eased forward to stand beside her. Hound remained in the other room nervously whimpering.

Doll saw the spinning tapes set behind glass on the wall in front of her. She looked down at the pile of rags and the white bones lying a few feet away. She made out the words taped on the crumbling robe:

Joseph Murphy
Chief Programmer
Rand Corp.

As Lank had before her, she pronounced the name aloud. She saw the irregular letters embroidered in scarlet at the bottom of the white tape:

REPENT

Thoughts bombarded her brain. She heard them singing their deadly songs and she tried to sort out the various refrains. Numbly she moved about the room and stumbled by accident upon the door that led into the automated room where she stood and watched the conveyor belt moving, carrying the by-now familiar food. She watched the poison drip down from a clear vial to fall and lay invisible upon the food.

She suddenly realized she was singing aloud the tradi-

tional service for the dead that characterized the cremation ceremony of the Copper Clan. "*May Murph rise up with you in your flames as you flee the sorrows of Afterit. . . .*"

"Doll," Lincoln whispered.

She had forgotten him. "Yes?"

"Who is that you mourn?"

Without hesitation she replied, "Murph."

"Murph?"

"He has Lost."

"When did he Toss?"

Doll shook her head. "I think it must have been in the very earliest days of Afterit, I think. . . ." Her voice trailed away as she struggled to sort out the thousand thoughts that were bursting in her mind like the stars she had sometimes seen streaking through the night skies. She was a child again and questioning. The difference between that child and the young woman that she now was became clear to her. For the child there had been no answers. For her now there were terrible answers. She heard the words echoing out of the wall in the other room.

"*Stop building this thing, Murph, please!*"

A little later: "*Go to hell, Eisenberg! The Toss I've been teaching the Survives. . . .*"

The words tore again and again through Doll's mind.

"Doll, please," Lincoln pleaded. "Let's go away where we can [illegible]."

She almost wept. There was nowhere to go. There was nowhere to go where Winning would be assured. She felt a thickness in her throat, a burning. She renounced it, flung back her hair and marched to the glass wall in the other room behind which the tapes spun, halted, and spun again. She gripped her knife, its hilt pointed at the glass. She raised her arm and brought the knife down. The glass shattered, drowning out the words of Murph that had not died when he did. She plunged the blade of her knife into the center of the spinning wheel.

It happened. She had expected it to happen. The words

stopped. A raucous clatter began as the wheel jerked clumsily for a time and then moved no more.

"You've killed him!" Lincoln cried in terror. "You've killed Murph!"

"Not I," she said. She thought of Lank. He must have found this place and understood even as she now did. And the understanding had left him desolate. To destroy the desolation, he had chosen to propagate what she now was sure were myths. And she thought she knew why. He had traded trust for power. That was the most awful part of it all.

She left the room and started down the corridor toward the shaft that led up from this place of death.

"Is Murph really dead?" Lincoln asked as he followed her.

She halted. "I think he died a long time ago, long before his heart stopped beating, long before his flesh rotted."

"It is right for us to mourn him."

"Yes, it is. Because I think he was trying to save us from something even worse than Afterit. I think he loved those of us who lived – who survived – in his time. All except Eisenberg."

"You are unhappy."

"Lank is unhappier."

"Is that why you are unhappy?"

She said nothing.

"If Lank were not unhappy, would you be happy?"

She couldn't bring herself to answer him.

"If you were happy," he told her, "I would be happy. And you would be happy if Lank were happy."

"Where is Hound?" she asked, looking around. "I'll get him." She went back down the corridor to search for the dog. After several minutes, she found him sniffing about the food on the conveyor belt. She seized the scruff of his neck and dragged him away from the deadlines that had lured him away from her. He escaped from her grip and bounded back into the room. She ran after him and struck him a

savage blow which made him yelp and run from the room. She chased him out of the adjoining room and down the corridor.

Lincoln was gone.

She had to carry Hound up the shaft herself. It took her a long time during which she found herself wondering why Lincoln had deserted her. He had never done that before.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lincoln, with only one thought in mind, ran all the way from Randland until he reached the temple. He raced inside it and found Lank alone.

"Be happy!" he shouted breathlessly as Lank spun around at the sound of his noisy entrance.

"Laugh!" Lincoln commanded. "Laugh out loud so that Doll will hear you!"

Lank frowned and muttered his annoyance.

Lincoln's commanding tone turned to one of pleading. "A smile? A small one? A little laugh? One just loud enough to prove that you can be happy?"

"Lincoln, your brain burns with a wildness that disgusts me. Go away. Go away and count the berries on the bay-bushes."

"You laughed with me once," Lincoln said. "It was at the waterfall in the night when we were both Coiners." The last word made him wrinkle his brow in thought. "Was I once such a one? Lank, was it so?"

"It was so."

"Where is the man I was then? I feel that I have lost him and if I seem dismayed it is because we two are even now in search of one another. To be disunited is to be unmanned."

Lank found himself marveling at Lincoln's mad wisdom.

Lincoln's face brightened and he waved his hands about in front of him in furious glee. "Laugh, Lank! Laugh as loud as the waterfall so that Doll will hear you and smile."

"What is this talk of Doll? Where is she?"

Lincoln shook his head.

"You and she have secrets from me?"

Lincoln began to move about Lank in a grotesque

parody of merriment. He bent; he bowed. His body dipped and twisted and on his face appeared a series of crooked expressions designed to make Lank laugh. And then, all at once, he flung himself forward and somersaulted across the room.

Lank, perplexed at this odd behavior, merely stared at him.

Lincoln was on his feet again. He sighed. His shoulders drooped and his hands hung at his sides. He stared at Lank and his stance altered so that his muscles began to tense and his hands to rise up in front of him. His face had darkened and he began to move stealthily toward Lank, his fingers flexing, his gaze glued to Lank's face.

Lank backed away in mild alarm and collided with the heavy bulk of Murph behind him. "Lincoln, stay back. I warn you!"

But Lincoln continued his advance until only a foot separated him from Lank. And then he leaped. Lank's breath shot out of his body as Lincoln's body crashed against his own. Lincoln's arms were around him and he felt himself being lifted up off the floor and swung around in an ever-widening circle.

"Stop!" he roared in anger. He tried to free his arms that were trapped against his sides but Lincoln's grip was impossible to sunder.

"Laugh!" Lincoln ordered. "Like this." His own voice rang out in the air of the temple as he threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "It is easy, Lank. *Try!*"

"Coiners!" Lank shouted.

Within seconds, four men came running into the room and stopped in surprise at the sight that met their eyes.

"Move, fools!" Lank shouted at them. "Make this mad animal release me!"

The four men ran forward quickly. They seized Lincoln's arms and broke his grip on Lank. Two of them held Lincoln's arms while the other two struggled to seize his feet which he had begun to kick in the air in desperate protest.

One of the Coiners took a well-aimed blow from Lincoln's left foot and went reeling back against the wall. But a moment later, they succeeded in restraining him. Lank came up to Lincoln and stood in silence before him for a brief moment. Then he spat in Lincoln's face. "Murph has mauled you and made you mad. I think a Toss is in order to determine whether you should live on in your insanity or die Decoined."

"You and I laughed once together," Lincoln said, as Lank's spittle trickled down the side of his face. "Doll would be happy to hear you laugh again."

Lank's fist shot out and slammed against Lincoln's stomach.

Lincoln doubled over but the Coiners jerked him erect again with his arms still twisted behind his back. The other two Coiners still squatted on the floor, each holding one of Lincoln's ankles in a firm grip. He gagged and fought to regain his breath.

Lank raised his fist again.

"Don't!"

Lank and the Coiners turned swiftly at the sound of Doll's cry. She was standing in the doorway, her face stricken, her right hand stretched out in front of her as if to ward off a blow that no one was directing at her.

"Lank – Lank has no laughter left in him." Lincoln gasped when he saw Doll. "I – I could not make him happy."

"Lank," Doll said. "Let him go." When Lank ignored her, she strode across the room to the Coiners and repeated her command. "Let him go."

The four men looked at Lank. Impatiently, he gestured. They released their hold on Lincoln who went to Doll and placed his thumbs at the corners of her mouth and pressed upward. A grotesque imitation of a smile appeared on her face as a result of his efforts. She reached up and brushed his hands away.

"Lank," she said, "I would talk with you."

"First," he said, "take this madman away. He is dangerous."

Not Lincoln, Doll thought. He is not dangerous. It is you who are dangerous. She turned to Lincoln and said, "Find a stick and throw it so that Hound may chase it. Play."

"We were in Randland," Lincoln told Lank. "Murph lost."

"What is it you say?" Lank demanded.

The Coiners looked uneasily at one another.

"Pay him no attention," Doll said. "Go, Lincoln. I will be with you later." She waited, a stern expression on her face, until Lincoln reluctantly left the room, calling to Hound who loped after him. She spoke to Lank again. "There are things I would say to you."

Lank's eyes narrowed as he turned back to her from watching Lincoln leave. "I listen."

"Not here," Doll said. She glanced at the Coiners who still hovered about the room like restless birds.

Lank turned swiftly and made his way to his quarters at the rear of the temple. Doll followed him.

When he was seated comfortably on the pile of furs with a wineskin at his side, he waited for her to speak. When she did not, he said, "Lincoln talks of Randland and Murph. What have you to say to me? Words as wild?"

Looking at him, Doll found herself unable to speak. He seemed a stranger to her. His face was the same. The same handsomeness that she had learned to admire still met her gaze. His lithe body was still muscular and firm and she still felt the light of desire flash unexpectedly within her. She looked at his hand and remembered how he had touched her outside Randland. But there was a barrier between them now. She could not see it but she was convinced that, if she moved toward him, she would stumble against that barrier and it would keep her away from him. The thought occurred to her that it would also lock him within its circumscribed boundaries.

"Shall I call Lincoln and have him tell his tale to me?"

Lank asked, opening the wineskin and raising it to his mouth.

"Lincoln told the truth," she said. "We were in Randland. We have just come from there. We went to find what it was that you found there when last we Lost."

He lowered the wineskin. "You make little sense to me."

"We found new horrors in Randland. We found Murph."

He stiffened. "Murph? Murph is here. You have heard him."

"He is also there."

"Well, yes, that is so. Of course, he is there. We have heard him. What I meant was –"

"What you meant was that Murph is alive," she said, interrupting. "But I know he is not. I saw his bones. They were bones like ours. He was like us – while he lived."

"Take care, Doll. Your talk might unsettle the Survives were it to reach them. Your confusion would cause them uneasiness."

She moved forward, expecting at any minute to be forced to halt by the barrier she sensed between herself and Lank. But it did not appear and she found herself standing in front of him. She slowly dropped to her knees and placed her hands on his bare shoulders. She looked directly into his eyes and said, "Lank, I know."

He drank again. "What is it that you think you know?"

She sighed and removed her hands from his shoulders. She had expected him to respond to her touch. The fact that he did not worried her. "I know that you found out that all this –" she gestured in a way that encompassed the temple "– all this is a lie. I know that you are trying to turn it into truth again. For yourself – for all of us. But you cannot. You will fail. But there is time to change things. You can give up the lie as well as that which you once thought was the truth. We could go away together, beyond the last outposts of the Clans. They say the sea is out there

somewhere. It is clean, they say, and fresh. We could live together there and make our own truths."

"The Survives bring tribute to the temple," he said. "It is good and it makes life bearable."

"Tribute cannot take the place of truth."

"It must – for me. You speak so easily of truth. I have learned that truth is whatever a man is willing to believe No more, no less. The Survives believe in what has always been and I will see to it that they continue so to believe."

"You think that is to your benefit?"

"I know it is. Doll, forget what you claim to know. We will remain here and prosper under the eye of Murph."

She stood up and turned her back to Lank. "You harm them – all of them – and yourself by this lie."

"Harm them? You are wrong. If I have increased the Tribute, have I not also eliminated the Toss? Is that of no value?"

"You Decoined Berg. Did he know your new truth too?"

"That is no concern of yours."

"You are a concern of mine." She turned back to face him. "Come away with me and let the others do what they will in your absence. There is still time for us."

"This is all I have and all I know. I cannot leave it."

"You will not."

"Perhaps that is so."

"Lank, I cannot stay. The knowing is too painful. I could not stay and watch you lie."

"Then go."

Doll felt the walls of the room crumbling about her. She felt them falling upon her and crushing her beneath their weight. She heard herself crying out Lank's name and waiting an eternity for an answer that did not come. "Alone?" she asked, guessing what the answer would be.

"If you so insist. But you have a choice. You can choose to stay."

She left the room, leaving behind her a part of herself that she knew as lost forever now and that she would never

find again. As she left the temple and wandered without purpose or direction in the scarred and desolate expanse of Afterit, she could not bring herself to give up. There had been a moment during her confrontation with Lank when she thought she had seen something drift across his face, an expression of gentleness that might have been aroused by memory, and she had thought he would get up and come to her and together, with arms linked, they would set out in search of the sea and a new life they could make their very own. One without Coins or temples or tribute. It was that momentary glimpse of gentleness in Lank that she would not forsake, could not. If he did not have the courage to let go of what was turning to ashes in his hands, she might yet find a way to make him let go for his own sake. And for hers.

She walked on more quickly with a purpose and a goal now that an ember of hope had begun to glow within her.

It was Raymond himself who stood waiting for her when the great gates swung open to admit her into the enclave of the Copper Clan. The sight of him, as always, brought a surge of joy to her heart. Riding on the wave of that joy was the foam of hope.

"Raymond," she said. "I give you greeting and good wishes."

"Doll." He raised his arms and she entered their circle which closed about her. "You have come back because none of us has any need of our Coins now. You know that you will be welcome here now."

She wanted to tell him that what he said was true. His own hope made his voice rise and the burden of his age seem to lighten. He had always loved her, she knew. In the old days, when she had been unaware of the mysteries that would be hers when she became a woman, he had walked with her and told her stories that had made her laugh and, sometimes, cry. He had looked benignly on the love that he saw flowering between her and the boy whose name was

Trust and who, she had learned on her previous visit here on behalf of Lincoln, was dead. Raymond. He had been the only one who had not wanted her expelled from the clan. In many ways, he, like her, was alone.

"I come, Raymond, but I do not expect a welcome."

He smiled. "I welcome you, Doll."

"There is something I must tell you and the members of the Council. It is a thing as hard as stone and as sharp as the teeth of the wild dogs. But it is a thing that must be told. Will you call a Council?"

"Doll, why must you always speak when silence would serve you better? I do not know of this thing you would tell, but I remember other days with the sound of your voice crying questions in the air. I remember there were no answers but an evil aftermath. Stay if you will but keep silent."

"It concerns Lank and is important."

Raymond's head nodded as a faraway look crept into his eyes. It was the look of a man who remembers something fine and tender. "Ah, it concerns Lank, does it? I suspect that it also concerns love."

Doll said nothing but her expression announced the accuracy of Raymond's speculation.

"Tell me what troubles you, Doll. That small telling may well be enough to quiet whatever storm rages within you."

"No," she said. "I must tell it to the Council."

Raymond released her and stood back, studying her. "I am afraid."

"All of us are in Afterit. What I have to say may be the beginning of the end of that fear."

Reluctantly, Raymond called a Council over the objections of Perth, the leader of the Clan elders.

When they had assembled, Doll was called and made to stand facing the semicircle they formed. A few of the Clansmen had gathered at the rear of the thatched hut that served as Council chamber to listen to what it was this girl

would now ask of them. They remembered her, some of them. They expected excitement.

"You come here to disrupt our ways," Perth observed petulantly.

A murmur of agreement swept from one to another of the old men who were so secure in their power.

"If your ways are disrupted, it is not I who causes it but the truth of what I have to tell. I have been in Randland."

"Why?"

"When?"

"How could you Lose when there is no more Toss?"

Doll waited for the questions to subside before speaking. She drew in a deep breath and said, "Randland is lifeless. So is Murph."

She waited for the angry cries to end. "It is true. I ask that you send men you will believe to accompany me to Randland and prove the truth of what I say. I stopped the voice of Murph. It was a relic of Beforeit, nothing more. His bones lie there in Randland, with other useless relics."

"Liar!" Perth screamed, his palsied hands trembling more violently than ever. "Take care! Your words will cause your Decoining. If we listen to them, our lives are liable to the same fate. Raymond, why do you let this woman come among us? It was you, I am told, who opened the gate. An unwise move."

"I remind you again, Perth, that she was once one of us [illegible]. . . ."

"She is one of us no more. That is the only fact that matters."

"It does not matter whether or not I am of this Clan," Doll said loudly, shouting to make herself heard. "What matters is the challenge I have given you. Send your most trusted men who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Then let them return and tell you of what I will show them in Randland. You need not believe me. But believe them."

A young man stood up in the midst of the crouching crowd behind Doll. She saw Perth gesture and turned to

face the man. He looked familiar but at first she could not remember where she had seen him. But then, as he moved to the front of the crowd, she knew. From the thongs bound about his knees, Coins dangled and clinked. He was a Coiner. She recalled that Lank had ordered a Coiner to live among each of the Clans now that the Toss was no more. The Coiner, he had said, would monitor the morals of the Clan members.

"I have no right to speak at Council," the Coiner began, "and yet my ears burn with the evil words this treacherous one has just spoken. I can only urge the venerable men before me to listen no more to her lies."

"They are not lies." Doll insisted.

"You said your words had something to do with Lank," Raymond prompted hopefully.

Doll heard the name sing in the air. But she had not intended to mention Lank. She had sought to accomplish her goal without involving Lank, except indirectly. She cursed herself for having mentioned his name to Raymond. "Yes," she said, rather to gather her thoughts in order to help Lank rather than harm him. "I did mention Lank. He seeks the good of all Survives, as you know. I ask you to go to him and tell him what I have said. Ask him to go with you to Randland to see the tomb of Murph "

"We would risk Decoining," Raymond said sharply as if he were seeking to awaken a sleepwalker.

"I beg you," Doll said.

The Council members muttered among themselves for some time and, when they were finished, Perth rose and pointed a shaking finger at Doll. "She defiles us now as she did when she was of this Clan. Drive her away that we may remain unsullied. You, Raymond, shall do it, as you did once before." Perth handed him a smooth club. "Take this and drive her away and let the gate remain forever closed to her from this moment on."

Raymond took the club Perth thrust into his hands and stood there with it hanging down in front of him. His head

was bowed and he stared at the club as if it were something that he had never seen before.

Doll began to edge toward the door. The crowd drew back as she moved among them. No one wanted to feel her touch; no one dared to look into her eyes

"Raymond!" Perth screamed in fury. "*Obey!*"

Raymond's head jerked up and he looked to the right and then to the left but he did not move.

Under Perth's urging and the epithets flung at him by the other members of the Council, he turned around, looking for Doll.

She met his eyes and shrank back from what she saw in them. He began to move toward her She stooped down and ducked through the low doorway of the hut. As she had done before, she ran past the rude replicas of the bearded man who was the protector of the Clan, past the crude dwellings and through the clouds of dust her flight raised until she reached the gate which was swinging open before her as if at her command. After she had passed through it, she kept running, unable to remain and become convinced that Raymond would really raise his club to strike her and drive her away.

She ran for nearly a mile before slowing her pace. Then, breathing heavily, she walked through the stalks of leafless trees, thinking that there was no way to force what she knew into the minds of the believers. She was a thief and they knew it. She had come stealthily among them to steal their treasure and they could not bear to part with it Without it, they could not live. And so they had driven her from their midst to protect themselves.

She began to see the pattern of her life as a cycle. This was a repeated episode in that cycle. Would this same cycle repeat itself endlessly, with her caught helplessly within it, forever alone and alien? But she was trying to break that cycle. She was trying to break it once and for all and when she had succeeded, she would start a new cycle with Lank who had not possessed her in the Place of Pits, not really.

but who now owned her, she admitted to herself, as much as he owned the minds of the Survives he pretended to serve.

She sat down on an outcropping of rock and thought of what she would do next. Her options were limited. She could return to the temple and Lank and remain silent. She could go back to her cavern and live as she had before Lank appeared like the new sun on her bleak horizon, setting it ablaze with the possibility of beauty. Or she could continue in what even she now deemed her possibly futile and potentially dangerous endeavor to create a new world for herself and Lank as well as for Survives everywhere. The sheer enormity of what she was doing – its daring that might only be foolhardiness – suddenly swept over her and she lowered her head to her knees in dismay.

Finally, she got up and made her way toward the granite cliff into which the members of the Tribe of Five, Lank's own Clan, had hollowed the tunnels where they lived like pale bees in a stone hive.

When she reached the face of the forbidding cliff, she stood with her head thrown back and called up to the ones who watched the lowland for the arrival of enemies. She told them her name and said she had news for them that they must hear.

She waited while the Clansmen consulted. After an interminable time, they lowered a slatted ladder so that she could climb up to the main tunnel off which branched the other tunnels where the tribe lived.

They refused to call a Council. They told her that she was not one of them and therefore ineligible to sit at Council She told them that she had come from Randland with a message about Murph. When this piqued their interest, she told them that Murph had told her certain things that she should communicate to Survives everywhere. They were things that the Clansmen would want to ask Lank about.

Despite her provocative statements, the Tribe refused to hear her. Randland was no more, they reminded her. And

Lank now spoke for Murph. Let Lank summon them to hear her news if he deemed it of value. She should go to Lank, they said.

She protested as they forced her to the very edge of the tunnel where the cliff dropped sheerly away. She saw that she had no choice. She climbed back down the ladder and, when she reached the ground, she screamed up at the faces peering down at her.

"*He is dead!*" she screamed. "Murph lies rotting in Randland and you are all fools who play with toys and call them mysteries!"

They began to pelt her with stones and sharp sticks.

With her hands raised to shield her head, she fled from them.

An hour later, as twilight muddied the land and no lights but the weak stars shone anywhere, she walked along, wishing she could cry but unable to summon a single tear. They all had been steamed away in the heat of her anger that grew out of her intense sense of frustration.

She sat down once to rest but got up immediately, alarmed at the distant sound she had heard. Perhaps the dogs were hunting. She hurried on, going nowhere. A hooting punctured the deepening darkness and she looked back over her shoulder. A bird?

How long, she wondered, had she been traveling. Judging by the position of the sun at the beginning of her journey and estimating now the age of the night, she decided it must have been nearly an entire day. She had been gone for hours from the unsmiling face of the cliff that harbored the Tribe of Five.

She stopped and listened. The night had betrayed her. She was not alone in it. She sensed something nearby. The night, she knew, was no protector; it gave its shadow as shelter to the hunted and the hunter alike and displayed no preference for either.

The trees stood still as if listening with her. She began to run when she heard the sound of the grunt and the thud

that meant that something or someone was nearby and had stumbled in the darkness. She could not risk waiting to find out if the noisemaker was enemy or friend.

The branches tore her hair and slit her skin and she cried out in near panic. She tore her knife from her waistband as she ran and wondered what flesh she might find to bury it in. Perhaps the goats had come wandering down from the mountain. But she was sure they had not.

They brought her down as she darted out of the grove of trees onto a patch of open plain. She screamed more in fury than in fright because they were merely men and she had her knife and her knowledge of how a woman might survive under such an onslaught.

But they overpowered her, the four of them. She felt herself being bound but she would not cry out as the thongs bit into her wrists and ankles. As they raised her up to place her on their shoulders, she caught a glimpse of their faces.

"Coiners," she breathed in surprise. And then the world tumbled down about her and she realized she should not be surprised. "What will you do with me?" she asked, not really wanting to hear their answer.

The one who had protested her speech at the council of the Copper Clan answered her. "I went and told Lank of your words. He sent us in search of you."

"What will you do with me?" she asked again.

"Nothing," another of the Coiners replied as they trotted along with her clasped tightly to their right shoulders. "It is Lank who will decide what is to be done with you."

"What I said was true," she gasped, her breath coming hard in the face of their jostling. "Lincoln was with me. He saw it too."

"Lincoln," laughed the Coiner who had spoken first. "Like him, your wits are gone. Like Lincoln, you will probably be Decoined."

"Lincoln," she breathed. "Has he been Decoined?"

"Not yet. Now be silent or we will shut your mouth with

a piece of our Afterit earth which you seem to despise so thoroughly."

Doll said no more as they carried her trussed and helpless to Lank and whatever awaited her at his hands.

As the Coiners carried Doll into the inner area of the temple and placed her, still bound, on the floor, she looked up and saw Lank standing a few feet away, his forehead bent to touch Murph and his arms spread out along the lines of flashing lights that studded Murph's countenance, their gay lights glowing green and blue and red against his skin.

He remained motionless for some time, giving no sign that he had heard them enter. The Coiners stepped back and took up positions near the door. Doll closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pain in her wrists and ankles where the thongs were eating into her flesh.

Lank at last gave a great sigh that contained within its sibilance the false sound of regret and acceptance of duty. He turned slowly, lowered his arms to his sides and looked down at Doll. His head moved slowly from side to side as if to negate the sight of her or to chastise her for something she had done or left undone.

"Free her," he ordered the Coiners.

They stepped forward at once and bent to obey his command. They sliced through the thongs with their thin knives and then withdrew to stand motionless by the door.

"Doll," Lank said, "the Coiner who protects the Copper Clan from error brought news of you and it was hard to bear. Is it true that . . .?" He stopped and looked up at the Coiners. "Go," he said to them. "I will talk to her alone."

When the four men had slid from the room like shadows escaping an intolerable sun, Lank bent down and held out his hands to Doll.

She eased herself to a sitting position without his help and then stood up stiffly, grimacing at the pain that shot through her legs and arms.

He withdrew his hands. "I told you – I warned you. I

said you should keep silent. You will destroy what I am so carefully cultivating."

"I believe it deserves only destroying. If it is not destroyed, you may be. I do not want that."

"Then what is it you want?"

"Only a time to be together in a place where the seed that we planted outside Randland may blossom and grow. Oh, Lank, why did you have them hunt me down like some wild creature?"

"I will not let you bring disorder among the Clans."

"But there is disorder now. Murph created it. So did Eisenberg – the first Eisenberg. I don't understand it all and I cannot prove any of it but I saw – I heard. . . ."

"You have heard and you have seen. Then you should know that Joseph Murphy's purpose was good. I plan only to walk in the path of his purpose."

Doll shook her head. "Murphy was wrong. I heard Eisenberg say so. He said that it was not decision-making that was wrong – only some decisions. But you would obscure that truth from the Clansmen. And, worse, you would let your own Coin decide for all. That is wrong. The Survives should have the freedom to decide for themselves."

"If they did, Beforeit would return. All our world would become a Place of Pits where the sickness walks unseen."

"It may be so. And yet, it may not be so. It may be that we could learn to build." She paused. "To love. . . . To turn Afterit into an abandoned Beforeit and build a new world that is nothing more than *now*!"

"No! I will not allow it!"

Doll covered her face with her hands. When she lowered them, there was an expression of despair on her face. It dragged at the corners of her mouth and dulled her eyes. "That is the danger. *You* will not allow it. You will. . . ."

"I have nothing now, don't you understand? Nothing except the hope of a comfortable life that is free from fear. Before I learned the truth about the birth of Afterit, I walked always in fear. I was afraid to Toss and more afraid

not to Toss. My life was limited. Now I rule it and myself. Do not try to defeat me, Doll."

"But don't you see?" she cried. "I am not trying to defeat you. I am trying to show you that there is no battle worth fighting between us. There should be only us."

They both stopped speaking as Lincoln, with Hound at his side, wandered into the temple. Lincoln paused when he saw them, gave them both a smile, and said, "There are nine hundred and thirty-six berries on the baybushes that border the temple."

Hound strolled to the nearest cubicle and crawled inside.

"Go away, Lincoln," Lank said.

"But I have finished counting all the berries."

"Be quiet, Lincoln," Doll said. "Sit there and think of waterfalls while Lank and I talk. When we finish. . . ." She found no words to complete her statement. "Lank, come away with me. Now. One day someone will dare to go down into Randland and they will find out the truth. As the seasons pass without a Toss, the Survives will begin to lose their fears of Randland. Curiosity will replace it. And they will remember my words. Perhaps one of the children who heard me speak will remember. Then they will come to you and destroy you for what you have done to them."

Lank narrowed his eyes. She was right and he knew it. Already the damage was done. Doll was his one miscalculation. He had handled Berg and Jersey. He guided the Coiners who dutifully performed the tasks he outlined for them. The Survives now looked to him as their protector. But Doll was trying to undermine the foundations of all that he had so carefully constructed. He could not allow it. As he looked at her, he remembered the touch of her hand on his arm in Randland when he had reached out in his hunger for the food that had appeared so miraculously. He fought the impulse to go to her now and take her arm and walk away with her – to anywhere. But she was only a woman. And the temple was thick with women. He would

not trade his new world for the sweetness of her lips or the juices of her loins. He would protect that world and himself from her and the threat that she was to both. The world he had known had died with his discovery in Randland. He had, in pain and bitter anguish, salvaged what he could of that splintered world and turned it to his advantage. He had thought that Doll would want to share it with him but she had chosen instead to seek the same truth that had become his. That truth, he believed, had not conquered him. But it had conquered Doll in a way she could not have anticipated. He had already made his decision, he realized. He had decided to relinquish Doll at the very moment the Coiner had brought him word of her activities among the Copper Clan. Suddenly, stifling the last stirring of the sad bird which fluttered its feeble wings in his bowels, he shouted for his Coiners.

They appeared instantly in the doorway, glancing from him to Doll and back again.

"Take her," Lank said. "Hold her."

"Lank," said one of the Coiners, "there are people gathering in the courtyard. Perth, an elder of the Copper Clan, is among them. He would speak to you about this blasphemer."

"Send them away," Lank said.

The Coiner who had spoken looked at his companions and then spoke to Lank again. "Send them away? But they have come to demand her Decoining."

Lank's eyes narrowed and then he said in a more conciliatory tone. "Tell Perth I will speak to him after I have consulted with Murph. Tell him to wait on me – on Murph. Meanwhile, take her away."

Doll sprang to one side as the Coiners advanced upon her. She darted beneath the outstretched arms of one of the men and made a dash for the door but they blocked her path and flung her roughly to the floor. She cried out in shock and pain.

Hound came bounding out of the cubicle at the sound of

her cry. He skidded to a halt on the slippery floor when he saw the Coiners straddling her and struggling to restrain her flailing limbs. The fur on the back of his neck bristled and his lips drew back. Saliva dripped from them and a deep growl rose out of his throat. Tensing his hind legs, he prepared to spring.

Lank, seeing what was about to happen, ran from the room. He returned seconds later. In his hand he carried a broken Beforeit icon of iron that was molded in the shape of a man whose hands were piously folded in front of him. His reentry into the room caused Hound to halt his taut advance upon the Coiners and turn his head. Lank raised the icon and advanced upon the dog. As Hound leaped for his throat, Lank brought the weapon down in a swift arc to shatter the dog's skull.

There was no scream from Hound as the blow struck. He merely fell to the floor, his body heaving convulsively, blood gushing out onto the floor from his splintered skull.

Doll screamed and wildly fought the Coiners but they quickly overpowered her and dragged her from the room.

Lank went outside a moment later and greeted Perth and the other members of the Copper Clan. "The fate of Doll will be decided later," he told them. "I must first speak to Murph and ask his counsel. I will come to you again and, until that time, I ask you to be patient."

There was some muttering among the people gathered in the courtyard as Lank withdrew but then they all squatted down to await his return.

Lank hurried into the temple, his thought on wine that would ease the agony that had begun to engulf him. He stopped when he saw Lincoln in the center of the floor on his knees. Lincoln's head was bent and his face was buried against the body of Hound that lay so still beneath it.

"Clean this place," Lank ordered, failing to disguise the quivering of his voice.

Lincoln looked up at him with no hate and little understanding. "Where has Hound gone?"

"Where we will all go either late or soon." Lank hurried around Murph and into his quarters where he threw himself down on the pile of furs. But they smelled like Hound and he sprang up, horrified. He found a wineskin and drank deeply from it. Soon the fire that the wine kindled in his belly matched the blaze in his mind.

He sat there, the wineskin cradled between his knees, and stared unseeing into the room. As the wine burned deeper into him and sent its flames to singe the dark paths of his brain, he alternately smiled and grimaced. He looked about him and was amazed to find that everything in the room had doubled. He cocked his head to one side but it did not alter the strangeness. Every Beforeit relic was duplicated. As were the windows, the door, the chair.

The wine had somehow increased his wealth and he was amused. It reminded him that he had become a ruler and his kingdom was all of Afterit. That, in turn, reminded him that some of his subjects sat outside awaiting his judgment of Doll. Well, they would have it. He would come before them and bring her to stand before him and he would look on her and see an earlier girl with a fragment of green glass in her hand who had once tried to kill him. He corrected himself. Who had *again* tried to kill him by going among the Survives and telling the truth that they preferred to think of as lies if they were to continue to survive.

As the wine trickled down his throat, Lank thought of the night of the waterfall and the catfish Lincoln could not eat because his Coin had forbidden it. But he – Lank – had changed all that. Now, if Lincoln wanted catfish, he could have all he wanted and no Coin would interfere with this wanting. Except mine, Lank thought, if for any reason I should decide that catfish are to be denied Lincoln.

He heard the people outside chanting Murph's song and calling his name impatiently.

"*Drinking buttermilk through the week, whiskey on a Sunday. . . .*"

"*We await you, Lank.*"

What was buttermilk, he wondered, as he drained the last of the wine and got drunkenly to his feet. Another of Murph's mysteries that would remain forever unsolved. Just as well. The solving of Murph's mysteries crushed a man's mind and tore his heart to shreds. He groped along the wall, oblivious of the rivulets of wine trickling down his bare chest, and went out into the temple.

The crowd was larger now; he could tell by the sound of their singing. Many voices were raised and the word they threw up into the air from the strong throats was "*Decoin.*"

"I will Toss!" he shouted at them as he came out into the courtyard. "Bring Doll so that she may hear her fate."

The Coiners dragged Doll out of one of the cubicles in which they had imprisoned her and held her before Lank with her arms twisted behind her. He avoided looking at her as he removed Berg's Coin from the pouch of his cheek and wiped the wetness from it against his chest. He had some trouble placing it correctly on his bent thumb but at last he succeeded. When the crowd saw that he was ready, that he was about to Toss, they quieted.

Lank released the trap of his thumb and the Ten went spinning into the air. "Heads to Decoin!" he cried at the top of his voice. He held out his hand and the Ten fell into it. "*Tails!*" he shouted, almost forgetting to edge his voice with regret.

Doll's body slumped in the grip of the Coiners and her head fell forward.

Lincoln, who had just come out of the temple, went to her and bent down, trying to see her face. He touched her cheek tenderly and when she did not respond, he stood beside her, disconsolate.

"She shall not be Decoined," Lank declared through loose lips and turned to reenter the temple.

But Perth stood up and placed his palsied hand on Lank's shoulder. "Although she is not to be Decoined, she must still be punished," he said to Lank. "It is only right."

Lank shook himself free of Perth's hand. "I have Tossed." He tried to make it sound final but Perth would not be put off.

"What punishment does Lank deem fitting?" Perth persisted.

Lank's thoughts whirled. He had tried to make an end to it. But this old fool would not let the matter rest.

"Lank?" Perth stood his ground.

Lank reached up to slip Berg's Coin into his cheek but his hand fumbled and the Ten fell to the ground and rolled away, stopping inches from Doll's feet.

She raised her head when she saw it and looked at Lank. Suddenly, she twisted her arms violently, throwing the Coiners who held her off balance. Their grip loosened and she broke free of them. She bent down and picked up the Ten and was about to offer it to Lank when something about it caught her interest. She turned it in her hand and drew in her breath sharply.

"Give it to me!" Lank bellowed. He stumbled forward and tore the Coin from her hand.

But she had seen its duplicated sides. She had seen that it bore the image of Tails on each side. Understanding flooded through her. Again, she heard Lank's voice cry out, "*Heads, to Decoin!*" He had deliberately prevented her death! She opened her mouth to speak to him but he was already moving away from her.

Perth once more gripped Lank's arm. Doll listened as they argued for several minutes. Finally, Lank turned to the people. "Murph himself will decide her punishment," he declared, and then entered the temple.

The Coiners seized Doll and dragged her after him. The elders of the Copper Clan and as many of the gathered Clansmen as could manage it, squeezed themselves inside the room.

Lank was standing in front of Murph. He tried to think clearly but the wine was a turbulent river surging within him and his thoughts were drowning in it. I have saved her,

he thought. She deserves no saving. She will kill me. They want her blood because they are afraid of what she knows and what she might force them to know – that this is all nothing and has always been only nothing. If she were only to go away. . . . Out of sight, out of mind.

His fingers seemed to move of their own free will. They touched the switch that would activate the messages of Murph that the Coiners studied so assiduously. They punched in the last phrase that Lank had thought and which seemed to offer him safety from Doll.

OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND.

There was a faint whirring within the machine and then the white tape came inching out. Lank tore it loose and held it before his eyes. He could not read the translation at first. The letters made no sense. They fought with one another, hid behind one another. He desperately sought to focus his eyes.

"*Invisible idiot!*" he called to the crowd when he deciphered the words at last.

They looked dumbly at one another.

Hating them, hating Doll and himself, he explained. "I told Murph that she was better out of sight, out of mind. He concurred with my judgment. He has called her an invisible idiot. She shall therefore be taken away and. . . ." The thought came to him the way lightning comes to the sky – sharply and with no warning. "Take her back to her cavern. Bring stones to close its entrance. Let there remain only the smallest opening through which a Coiner will pass food and water to her once each day until the day when she requires no more. Make of her an invisible idiot!"

An approving roar went up from the collected Clansmen. Lank nodded to show that he had heard it and understood its meaning. It is ended at last, he thought. The Clansmen have Won; I have Won. They have the victim they need. I have retained my power over them by providing her. Only Doll has Lost.

She spoke to him then in a tone that betrayed nothing of

the terror she was feeling. "Lank, will you care for Lincoln? Will you keep him here? He has need of someone."

Her words infuriated Lank, her talk of need and caring. "I have no need of him or anyone."

"I know that," she said. "It is only of Lincoln's need that I speak."

Liar, he thought, sick with a new and greater despair. "If he has need of someone, then let it be you." He abruptly Tossed his Coin. "Tails will send Lincoln to share Doll's fate," he cried out to the crowd.

His Coin came up Tails.

He glanced at Doll, daring her to speak and openly denounce the trickery of his Toss.

She turned away from him without a word. She walked out of the temple, past Perth and the others, some of whom shrank back as she approached, some of whom spat as she passed by. The Coiners followed her, dragging Lincoln behind them.

Hours later, Doll stood inside her cavern as the Coiners rolled the heavy boulders up to its entrance and strained to lift them into place. She watched as the sunlight was diminished by their efforts and the cavern gradually grew gloomier than it had ever been and in a way that it had never been.

Lincoln sat near her on the ground, seemingly unconcerned with the events that were taking place outside and which would place unbreakable limits on his already severely limited life. He used his own saliva to moisten his paints and began to draw another adventure of noman on the cavern wall, humming happily to himself as he did so.

Doll heard the Survives talking outside the prison the Coiners were building to contain her. She was not hurt by the filthy names they flung at her from time to time. She listened as they spoke of Lank.

"He will guide us safely through Afterit," someone said.

"Yes," someone else agreed, "he has already convinced

Murph that we need no longer Toss."

Someone sighed, an expression of vast relief. "Even the increased Tribute is not too high a price to pay for such a one who can make even Murph bend to his will."

A last boulder was wedged into place. A jagged aperture remained through which only a shrunken shaft of sunlight entered the cavern.

Doll went up to the opening which was level with her forehead. She stood on her toes and peered out. The Coiners and the Survives were already moving away, their work done. She looked up into the sky and saw that the sun was setting. Behind her, Lincoln went on with his painting until the sun dropped so low that he could no longer distinguish between his colors.

When night came, Doll lay down in a corner of the cavern. She adjusted her position so that she could, while lying on her side, see a single star framed in the opening above her head.

Lincoln lay down beside her and she let him nestle against her, welcoming the warmth of his body against her own.

"We have Lost this one final time," she mused aloud.

"I have Won again," he murmured. "I have you."

Outside, the wild dogs were hunting, their baying a deadly melody drifting in the wind. Their howls reminded Doll of the other days, of Hound and hunting, all beyond recall now.

She rose up suddenly when she heard the other sound that was also loose in the night, a softer but more terrible sound than the baying of the dogs, one all too human. She told Lincoln to lie still and sleep when he asked her what was wrong. She stood beneath the opening, listening.

Someone was outside and that someone was weeping. Deep sobs thudded against the stones that imprisoned her. She could not believe he had come. She had believed that there was no one anywhere in all of Aftert who would weep for her. But, she thougnt, one does not always weep

for someone else. One sometimes weeps for oneself as Lank was doing now.

She leaned her head against the rough stones, not knowing what to do, knowing there was nothing more she could do for him now. All that she could do for him, she had done.

She went back and lay down beside Lincoln, her eyes on the aperture and the lonely star in her small sky. At last, the lost sound of Lank's sobbing faded away until the night was filled once more with only the eager baying of the hunting dogs.

Lincoln shifted position, touched Doll's cheek, and asked her why she wept.

She tried to think of an answer that would explain not only her tears but all else to him. She could think of none.

Soon, as the night deepened, even the dogs were silent.

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